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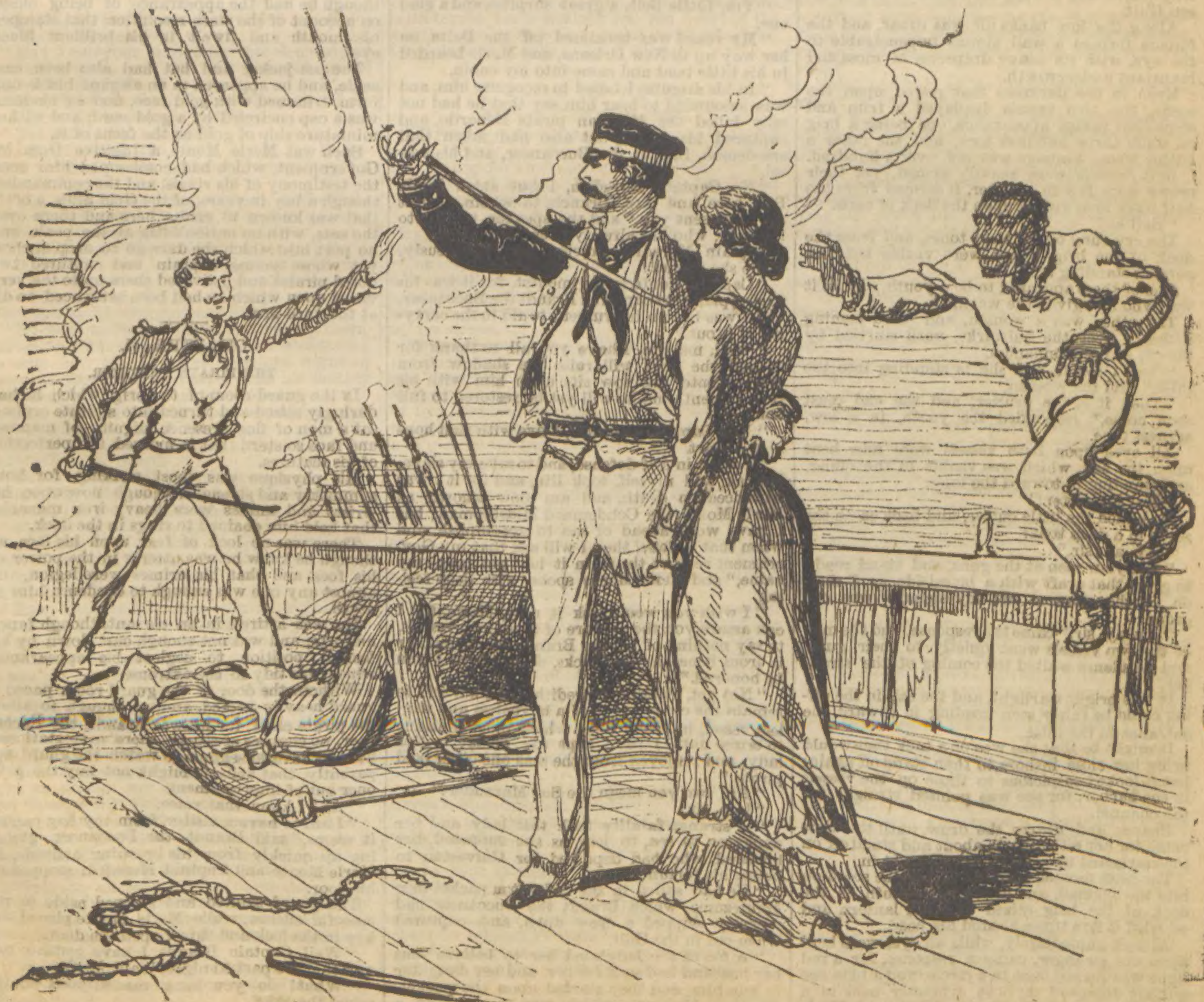
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MERLE MONTE'S FATE; or, PEARL, THE PIRATE'S PRIDE.

Companion Story to "Merle, the Mutineer," "Merle, the Mid y," "The Midshipman Mutineer,"
"The Floating Feather," "The Gold Ship," and "Merle Monte's Cruise."

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM.



"PEARL, MY BEAUTIFUL DARLING, I WILL DRIVE A WORD THROUGH YOUR PURE HEART BEFORE THEIR VILE HANDS
SHALL POLLUTE YOU WITH A TOUCH!"

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OR,
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Feather," "The Gold Ship,
and "Merle Monte's
Cruise."

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

CHAPTER I. MERLE MONTE.

Two armed vessels were lying at anchor in a secluded inlet of what is now the Louisiana coast, and at a time when piracy on the high seas was rapidly becoming a thing of the past, though the Gulf of Mexico still floated upon its waters a few daring rovers, too desperate to give up their lawless lives even with a certainty of death upon the gallows staring them in the face.

The presence of the two vessels in that secluded retreat was evidence sufficient to prove that some mystery hung about them, for few craft ever found their way into a place so desolate, and wholly away from all highways of trade as was the inlet.

It was a little harbor, large enough to ride at anchor perhaps half-a-dozen vessels, with heavily wooded shores, and a narrow passage-way connecting it with the waters of the Mexican Gulf.

Along the low banks all was drear, and the foliage formed a wall almost impenetrable to the eye, with its heavy draperies of moss and luxuriant undergrowth.

Even in the darkness that rested upon the scene, the two vessels displayed a trim and somewhat rakish appearance, one being a brig of some three hundred tons, and the other a cutter whose tonnage was not over a hundred.

Both vessels were heavily armed, yet their crews were few in number, it seemed from the half score men visible upon the deck of each.

"Sail ho!"

The cry rung out in clear tones, and from the deck of the brig, where were visible but two persons standing aft.

One of these appeared to be a youth, and he it was who had given the warning.

The other was a woman, and stood leaning listlessly over the bulwarks, until startled by the cry of her companion.

"Yes, I see it, and she is standing into the inlet," said the woman.

"Then it is the cruiser, and the end must soon come," responded the youth, in a low, earnest tone.

All eyes upon both vessels were now bent upon the sail, which was visible in the offing, and standing in toward the inlet.

"Ho! the cutter!"

He hailed the little cutter, and back came the reply in a deep tone:

"Ay, ay, sir."

"Put your men at the guns, and stand ready to greet that craft with a broadside, as I shall do, if she answers not my signal," was the order.

"Ay, ay, sir," came the response, and the men of the two vessels went quietly to their guns, and in silence waited the coming of the stranger.

It was bright starlight, and the sail in the offing could be fairly seen heading in toward the entrance to the inlet.

It might be that she was on a tack that would bring her close inshore, to then stand off again; but it looked suspicious to those on the vessels in the harbor, for she was pointed straight for the channel.

Nearer and nearer she drew, until the time came for her either to go about and stand off on the starboard tack, or to run straight in.

The next moment decided it, for she stood on into the channel, and at once the youth on the deck of the brig seized a battle lantern and whirled it five times around his head.

Almost immediately, while all eyes were bent upon the stranger, came a response, for a red light was turned once in a circle, and a blue one quickly followed it; both evidently held in a man's hand. "It is the Sea Wolf, and Merle Monte has been successful!" cried the youth.

And then on into the inlet came the stranger, shortening sail as she did so, until luffing up sharp, she dropped anchor not a cable's length from the two vessels that had been apparently awaiting her coming.

Hardly had the anchor of the new-comer found a place upon the bottom, when a boat put off from her side and approached the brig.

As it came alongside, two persons came over the gangway, one of them in appearance an ordinary seaman, in pea-jacket and general sailor garb, while the other was in the full uniform of a captain in the United States Navy.

"I am glad to see you back in safety, Captain Monte," said the youth, meeting the two at the gangway, and addressing the seaman.

"And I am glad to get back, and to bring with me Captain Mayo Meredith, of the Sea Wolf, whom you have before met," responded the person addressed, while the uniformed officer grasped the hand of the youth, and said:

"Yes, I have known your lieutenant here, Merle, under several aliases, first as my cabin boy, Little Belt, then as my friend and ally, Mr. Belden, whom I believed to be an old gentleman, and now as—"

"Lieutenant Belt, the men call me, Captain Meredith, though they know that I am a woman."

"But I am glad to meet you once more, and it is a happy moment for me now, when I know you have come to take Captain Monte's prisoner, Brandt, the Buccaneer," said the supposed youth in an earnest tone.

"It is a happy moment for me too, Little Belt, I can assure you, and by the capture of the noted pirate chief you have all done wonders, and accomplished what scores of cruisers have failed to do," answered Captain Meredith.

"I suppose it was a surprise to you, sir, to see Captain Monte?"

"Yes, Little Belt, a great surprise and a glad one."

"My vessel was becalmed off the Delta, on her way up to New Orleans, and Merle boarded in his little boat and came into my cabin."

"In his disguise I failed to recognize him, and was astounded to hear him say that he had not only killed the Mexican pirate Eduardo, and captured his cutter, but also had taken that sea-demon, Brandt the Buccaneer, and his vessel."

"No, Captain Meredith, I but aided Little Belt here, and Mrs. Branch, to whom, permit me to present you," and the speaker turned to the lady, who has already been referred to.

Captain Meredith greeted her courteously, while she replied:

"Captain Monte is too modest, for it was his daring plan that captured Brandt the Buccaneer, and I was but an instrument to aid in the carrying of it out."

"Well, madam, I have you all to thank for it, and the deed will raise the shadow from Merle Monte that now sits upon him with his Government, and he will yet be restored to full honor."

"Yes, Captain Meredith, I live with that hope in my heart."

"I acted in self-defense, and to save my slave, Mezrak, and myself, took life, and for it I was sentenced to death, and am now known as Merle Monte the Condemned Midshipman; but I have work ahead of me to accomplish, and when that is done, then I will ask that my Government remove the stain it has put upon my name," and Merle Monte spoke with deep feeling.

"I wish you would ask it now, Merle, for I can assure you the capture of these two vessels, to say nothing of having Brandt the Buccaneer in irons beneath your decks, demands that you be honored."

"Not yet, Captain Meredith, for I am still to remain the commander of a havenless and flagless vessel, my Gold Ship, which must continue to cruise until I have kept my pledge to this lady, and removed from the seas one other bold pirate."

"Ah! can you mean the Sea Marauder?"

"I do, sir."

"A strange fatality took this lady and her daughter to sea, to join, as she supposed, her husband, who had departed for Galveston to better his fortunes."

"He had sailed in the Galveston packet-brig Montezuma, which Brandt the Buccaneer had recently shipped a crew upon, and captured when out in the Gulf."

"A foe of this lady's led her to believe that her husband had sent for her and her daughter to join him, and they started upon the packet-schooner Flyaway which was wrecked in a storm."

"My vessel, the Gold Ship, picked up three persons off the wreck—this lady, the captain, and the man who had inveigled Mrs. Branch and her daughter from their home under pretense of joining the husband and father in Galveston."

"One of the boats was picked up by the brig commanded by the buccaneer chief, and upon which we now stand, and the daughter of Mrs. Branch was unfortunately in that one and hence fell into the hands of Brandt, who thereby gained possession of both father and daughter, for, as I said, Mr. Branch was a passenger on the vessel when it was seized by the pirate crew."

"And now that you have captured the brig and chief, where are Mr. Branch and his daughter," asked Captain Meredith, who was deeply interested in Merle Monte's story.

"They were not on board when we captured the Huntress, and Brandt, the Buccaneer, says he released them and sent them by a smack to New Orleans, and I have since learned by a coaster, that the little craft was overhauled by the Sea Marauder, and Mr. Branch and his daughter were taken prisoners by the pirate, and, the duty I have pledged myself to, Captain Meredith, is to restore to Mrs. Branch those whom she so fondly loves, and in doing so, to capture that third terror of the Gulf, and thus almost end piracy in these waters."

"Now come, and we'll go and see the pirate chief, but as there is no longer need of my disguise I will cast it aside."

As Merle Monte spoke he went into a state-room, and almost instantly returned, but so wholly metamorphosed that his voice alone seemed the same.

The unkempt beard and wig had been thrown aside, revealing a darkly bronzed face of rare power of expression in every feature, and handsome and youthful, for he was not past eighteen, though he had the appearance of being older, on account of the stern resolution that stamped his mouth and dwelt in his brilliant black eyes.

The pea-jacket and hat had also been cast aside, and he appeared in an elegant black uniform, trimmed with gold lace, and in his hand was a cap encircled by a gold cord, and with a miniature ship of gold on the front of it.

Such was Merle Monte, a fugitive from his Government, which had condemned him upon the testimony of his rivals, and the commander, though a boy in years, of the Gold Ship, a craft that was known to cruise here and there over the seas, with no nation's flag at the peak, and no port into which she dare go to drop anchor, yet whose young captain had captured two noted pirates and delivered them up to the very vessel upon which he had been sentenced to die at the yard-arm.

CHAPTER II.

THE PIRATE PRISONER.

In the guard-room of the brig, which he had daringly seized and turned into a pirate cruiser, sat a man of fine presence, dignity of manner, and face so stern that it marred the perfection of his features.

His physique was most striking, for both symmetry and strength, though now upon his wrists and ankles were heavy iron manacles that held him chained to rings in the deck.

There was no look of fear upon his face, although he knew he was utterly in the power of his foes, and that his crimes were legion, and almost any one was enough to condemn him to death.

He was attired in an elegant, though fancy uniform, and was not enough cast down by his fearful position to neglect his appearance, which was tidy in the extreme.

Without the door of the guard-room paced a guard heavily armed, and, as though to allow the pirate chief, for he was Brandt, the Buccaneer, no chances of escape, there were stationed near by several seamen to watch the guard apparently, that bribery might not buy the prisoner out of imprisonment.

"Ah! I know that voice."

"I am to have a visitor from my boy captor it seems," said Brandt, the Buccaneer, glancing up quickly from his brooding attitude, as Merle Monte and Captain Meredith stopped at his door.

The guard saluted and stepped aside in respectful silence, while Merle Monte placed the key in the lock and threw open the door.

"Well, Captain Brandt, I have come to tell you that we part to-night," said Merle.

"What! do you hang me without trial?" asked the chief.

"With your hanging I have nothing to do,

for I have surrendered you and your vessel to this gentleman."

"Hal! Captain Meredith!" cried the chief, evidently momentarily nonplused, as that gentleman stepped into the guard-room.

"Yes, Brandt, we meet again, and again do I accept you as a prisoner from Midshipman Monte," said Captain Meredith, quietly.

"Midshipman Monte?" sneered the pirate. "Then I suppose his capture of Brandt, the Buccaneer, has given him his old place and rank in the navy?"

"It would do more than that for him, Captain Brandt, if he would accept it."

"Is he such a fool as to refuse?"

"At present he prefers to cruise in his Gold Ship," quietly said Captain Meredith.

The pirate chief looked earnestly at Merle for an instant, and then said:

"Merle Monte, do not be a fool, but accept all you can get for your capture of me, for, if you continue to cruise about without a flag you will one day end as I will, at the yard-arm of a man-of-war."

"I thank you, Captain Brandt, for your advice, but I prefer to do as I please in the matter," said Merle, coldly.

The pirate smiled, and turning to Captain Meredith, he said:

"Strange as it may seem, sir, I like the boy, and I liked his father before him, for he was a good friend to me."

"On moment, please, Captain Brandt."

"It was reported at the court-martial that you were none other than Merle Monte's father."

"True, Captain Meredith, and I set that rumor afloat, for I sought to drive Merle from the navy, to further my ends."

"And you did save his life by a most daring act?"

"I did, sir, for I was determined not to see him die on the gallows."

"May I ask your motive for this clemency on your part, when you will end your life on the gallows through him?"

"Yes, it was to obtain his treasure, for if he died, it would be forever lost."

"But you failed in that?"

"I did, through the boy's nerve, for he refused to divulge the secret of where lay his treasure."

"The same which you now have on the Gold Ship, Merle?" asked Captain Meredith, turning to Merle, who answered:

"Yes, Captain Meredith."

"It was left him by his father, sir, who was known as Montezuma, the Merciless, and created the wildest *furor* in New Orleans a score of years ago by his extravagant living."

"He went to Persia to live, and leaving there, carried his immense riches with him, along with his wife, and this boy was born one night of storm, in the midst of battle, and his mother died then, while his father was killed."

"The faithful slave, Mezrak, whom you know, being the head servant, brought the yacht to the Mexican coast, I then being an under officer on board."

"But I sought to get the treasure, was thwarted by Mezrak, and set adrift in an open boat, and the yacht went ashore on an island."

"Mezrak saved the infant boy's life, and brought him up upon that island, and in long years of search I failed to find them; but when at last I did, I determined never to give up until I had the treasure too."

"Now, Captain Meredith, you have the history of the boy and his treasure, excepting that my vessel was wrecked upon the island, where the riches were buried, and I escaped death to go and get a vessel to seek the place once more."

"I returned there, to find that the boy had thwarted me again, for he had already secured a vessel, put his treasure on board, and it is in that craft, the Gold Ship, that he cruised after me and captured me by a most daring deed."

"Now I am your prisoner, it seems, and it looks as though my end had come; but, as I have lived, I will die, without fear."

The pirate chief had spoken rapidly, and in a manner that proved he seemed anxious to show that Merle Monte was more sinned against than sinning, and Captain Meredith had listened attentively to all that he had said, deeply interested in what he heard of the youth who had in the past been his *protege* and friend, and whose life had been one of such strange romance and thrilling adventure.

"Well, Captain Brandt, I am glad to know what you have told me regarding Midshipman Monte—"

"Midshipman Monte," sneered the pirate.

"Why, he is as fit to command a seventy-four

as you are, and a better officer to-day than half the admirals in the service."

"I agree with you, Captain Brandt, for Midshipman Monte, for such is his rank only in the navy, is a born sailor and commander, and he shall have all justice at my hands, and I thank you for your honest acknowledgment that he has been wronged."

"But my duty compels me to keep you in irons on board my vessel, try you for your crimes, and hang you if you are proven guilty."

"Why not hang me now and be done with it, for my trial can but be a farce," said the chief bitterly.

"No; if there is one thing in your favor you shall have justice, sir."

"Now I will send a guard for you, and have you carried on board of my vessel."

"I care not where I am; but what is Merle Monte to do?"

"He prefers to still cruise in his Gold Ship."

"Why do you not seize it, as in duty bound, for the vessel has no flag?"

"Because, Sir Pirate, I have honor, and Midshipman Monte having trusted in my honor, is free to go as he came, with no act of mine to detain him."

"Then I have a favor to ask."

"Name it."

"It is to request Monte to send a message for me."

"If he so desires he is at liberty to do so," said Captain Meredith.

"Will you do this for me, Monte?"

"Yes, if I consistently can."

"Well, let me whisper to you."

Merle stepped close to the chief, who raised his manacled hands to his shoulders, and drew his ear toward him.

Then, quick as a flash of lightning, he suddenly raised his right hand, and it descended with terrific force straight for the heart of the youth, and in it was a small dirk-knife, with long, narrow, needle-pointed blade.

CHAPTER III.

BACK TO THE GOLD SHIP.

WITH a cry of horror at the sudden and daring act of Brandt, the Buccaneer, Captain Meredith had sprung forward to check the blow.

But he had been too late, for Merle Monte had himself thwarted the deadly deed of the pirate.

He was ever watchful, and when he had stepped up to Brandt to have him whisper to him the message, he had seen a motion of his right arm that was suspicious, and as the hand was raised to his shoulder his quick eye had caught sight of something held tightly in it, and which had evidently been dropped there from up the sleeve.

Thus he was on his guard, and when Brandt, the Buccaneer, had quickly elevated his hand and brought it down, with a knife-blade aimed at the heart, his arm had been caught in a grip of iron, which checked its downward flight, though the keen point had cut through the cloth and pierced the flesh for half an inch just over the vital spot.

Then, still grasping the arm with a strength that was almost superhuman, for Brandt was a powerful man, he drew a pistol from his belt and struck the knuckles several hard raps with the iron barrel, which caused the pirate to utter a cry of pain and drop the dirk to the floor, where its point entered the deck, and it stood quivering like an aspen.

Kicking it away out of reach, Merle released his hold of the bleeding, benumbed hand of the buccaneer, and sprung backward, out of reach, just as Captain Meredith presented his drawn sword at the heart of the intended assassin, for all had occurred in an instant.

"Hold! do not cheat the gallows by killing him, Captain Meredith," cried Merle, seeing that that officer was white with rage at the act of the buccaneer, and meant to kill him then and there.

As he spoke, Merle clutched the blade, and Captain Meredith said quickly:

"You are right, Monte, and I thank you for your interference."

"Curse you, boy, you have again thwarted me by your strength, that broke the force of my arm, for I sought to avenge myself by killing you, and make that officer, in his anger, shoot me or run me through the heart, and thus cheat he hangman's rope."

Merle laughed lightly, while Captain Meredith said quickly: "Merle, did his knife not wound you?"

"A mere scratch, sir, though his blow was a terrific one, and well intended."

"Now, sir, I will leave the vessels and the

prisoners in your charge, and return to my Gold Ship with my people."

"If such is your decision, I have nothing to say, Merle," answered Captain Meredith.

"Farewell, Captain Brandt. May God have mercy upon your crime-stained soul."

"Now I will send one down to bid you good-by, whom you will care less to see than you do me," and Merle turned on his heel to follow Captain Meredith, who had stepped outside of the guard-room, when Brandt, the Buccaneer, said eagerly:

"Will you still pledge yourself to do me a favor, Merle Monte?"

"I will."

"Then send a messenger to New Orleans to seek out one Basil Branch, a planter and a gambler; his plantation is on the Mississippi River, and known as The Retreat."

"Let that messenger tell him that Brandt, the Buccaneer, is a prisoner on board the Sea Wolf brig-of-war."

"Well?"

"That is all."

"What is Basil Branch to you?"

"It matters not what he is to me."

"You set him and his daughter free when they were your prisoners?"

"I did."

"And you now wish only that message delivered to him?"

"That is all."

"Well, he is not in New Orleans."

"What?" asked the chief, in surprise.

"I speak the truth."

"Where is he?"

"On board the pirate schooner known as the Sea Marauder."

"Hal! And his daughter?"

"Is with him."

"How came they there?"

"They were captured by the Sea Marauder from the smack which you placed them on board of, and the pirate captain holds them for ransom."

"Hal! ha! ha! Little ransom gold will he get out of Basil Branch."

"Well, as I cannot deliver the message, farewell," and Merle left the guard-room and rejoined Captain Meredith.

Instantly orders were given to have four boat-loads of men sent from the Sea Wolf to relieve the two dozen seamen Merle had in charge of the brig and cutter and to take charge of the captured pirate vessels and their prisoners.

While these preparations were going on Little Belt slipped down to the guard-room and suddenly confronted the pirate chief.

The prisoner sat in moody silence, his right hand, which had received such a severe blow from the pistol of Merle Monte, clasped in the left, though of the pain he suffered physically he seemed not to be thinking.

"Well, Brentford, we meet again," said Little Belt, who had bade the guard step aside, and he, being one of Merle's crew, had readily obeyed.

"Great God! your voice is that of Belle Denham," cried the prisoner, half springing to his feet and facing her.

"I was Belle Denham, Brandt, the Buccaneer, before you dragged me from my home to bring sorrow and despair upon me," answered the disguised woman in earnest tones.

"In Satan's name, what do you here, after all the harm you have brought upon me?" he savagely asked.

"I will tell you, Sir Pirate, what I am doing here."

"Curses rest on you, I thought I had done with you when you had wrecked my vessel on Monte's Island and I left you there."

"Oh, no, for I let you go then, you remember, to have you yet die on the gallows or yard-arm."

"I knew you would gain a port and come back to the island for Monte's treasure, and so I let you go."

"I told you then that Merle and his slave, Mezrak, yet lived, and it was I that urged him to get a swift-sailing vessel, place his treasure on board, and thus thwart you."

"He did so, and more, he has hunted you down and captured you and your vessel, and I aided him to do so."

"Now he has given me leave to go to New Orleans, and I will not return to the Gold Ship until I see you hanged at the yard-arm."

"Now I will leave you, Brandt, the Buccaneer, but remember I am near you, and when you come to die for your crimes you will see my face among the others that are turned upon you, and upon mine you will read the joy I feel at having at last brought you to your death at the end of a rope."

Without another word, but with a mocking

laugh at his bitter curses, Little Belt turned and left the pirate.

Upon reaching the deck she found two boats alongside, with the crews which had been on the cutter and brig in them, while Merle Monte stood at the gangway talking to Captain Meredith.

"I have seen him, and when he is hanged I will rejoin the Gold Ship, Captain Monte; but for the present, good-by," and Little Belt stretched out his hand, and Merle Monte grasped it warmly.

Then, as his guard, which had been relieved by men from the Sea Wolf, came on deck and entered the waiting boats, Merle Monte said with feeling:

"Now, Captain Meredith, I must leave you, and when next we meet I hope I will be able to give into your keeping the Sea Marauder, her captain and crew."

Captain Meredith grasped the youth's hand, and then Merle Monte rapidly descended to his boat, in the stern-sheets of which sat Mrs. Branch awaiting him; the oars were let fall, and the Condemned Midshipman and his crew pulled away in the darkness on their way to their vessel, the Gold Ship, which was hidden in an inlet a league away.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SEA MARAUDER.

THE Gulf shores of the United States have a formation that constituted them the pirate's paradise, as there were innumerable hiding-places in the lagoons, bayous, inlets and bays that indent the shores.

Upon either side of the Mississippi river were these hot-beds of piracy during the last and in the early part of the present century, and even after the free rovers had been swept generally from the seas, there were a few bold freebooters who had their haunts along these shores.

It was in one of these numerous inlets of the Louisiana coast that Merle Monte had secreted the two pirate vessels he had captured until opportunity offered to surrender them to Captain Mayo Meredith, of the Sea Wolf, and, as I have before stated, his own vessel, a schooner, yet known as the Gold Ship, was then hidden, and most securely, though numerous cruisers were there on the search for the mysterious craft, which common rumor said was none other than a pirate.

So intricate and secure were these basins as hiding-places that, at the very time Merle Monte was pulling slowly along the shores in his boats en route to his Gold Ship, after leaving the Sea Wolf and her prizes, he passed within a few cables' lengths of a craft lying concealed in the mouth of the lagoon.

Even had it been daylight the boats might have gone within a hundred feet, or nearer, and not discovered the craft, for, by a natural canal, hardly wider than the vessel's beam, it had been drawn into a pond, for it was no more, where it could rest in safety.

It is upon this vessel, so securely hidden away, that I would have my reader accompany me, and upon the very night on which Merle Monte made the surrender of his prizes.

The pond in which it rode so quietly without an anchor down was not the half of an acre in size, yet the water was black and deep, and the craft could have been drawn through the narrow canal into the lagoon, where the breeze could catch its sails, in a quarter of an hour's time.

The little pond, or lakelet, was by no means a desirable anchorage, for its muddy banks were the resort of alligators, frogs croaked dismally by day and night, and the trees were sadder in their draperies of Spanish moss, which trailed to the black waters.

But it was the very place for a vessel to hide, whose captain cared not to have his whereabouts even suspected.

The vessel that had sought this secluded and gloomy refuge was a schooner of a hundred tons burden, and carried a broadside of three light twelve-pounders, and a thirty-two pivot fore and aft.

The hull of the schooner was graceful in model, and evidently built with a view to get all the speed possible, and still be a stanch sea-boat.

The masts were exceedingly tall for the vessel's build, and had the peculiarity of having the topmasts almost the same length as the lower ones, while the bowsprit shot out to a great distance beyond the high sharp bows, which showed she could crowd on an immense amount of sail, if necessary, above a very small hull.

As there was no need for a watch on deck in

such a retreat, the men had been allowed to turn in, excepting one, who paced the deck, with a quick, firm tread.

He had a cloak thrown over his shoulders, to protect him from the chilly night air, and his appearance was that of an officer.

Presently he started in his walk, for, though evidently deeply meditating, his quick ear had caught the splash of water.

It might be an alligator floundering in the pond, or a fish springing up into the air to fall back again.

Yet he was not one, apparently, to neglect any sound that had a suspicious ring about it, and instantly he became alert, and peered toward the canal leading into the pond.

But suddenly, over the side of the vessel, appeared a human form, and turning quickly, the officer confronted it.

"Ha! Peon, is that you?" he asked, as his hand dropped upon his sword-hilt.

"Yes, senor, I have returned," was the answer of the man addressed as Peon.

"You Indians move with such noiselessness, that I heard not your coming, save what must have been the splash of an oar."

"It is better to move quietly, senor," was the reply of the man, whose appearance, as seen in the starlight, indicated that he was a Mexican Indian of the class known as peons.

"Well, what have you discovered?" asked the officer.

"Two boats have just gone up the coast to the Gold Ship, senor."

"Well?"

"They came from the basin, where I told you the pirate brig and cutter were anchored."

"And you said one was the Huntress, Brandt the Buccaneer's brig?"

"Yes, senor."

"And you thought that the cutter was the pirate craft of Captain Eduardo?"

"It was, senor."

"Then the two must have formed a compact to cruise together?"

"No, senor, they were both prizes."

"Prizes! how mean you, Peon?"

"They were both the prizes of the Gold Ship."

"No!"

"True, senor, for the young captain of the Gold Ship captured them, and this night surrendered them to the Sea Wolf, the American cruiser."

"By Heaven! is this true, Peon?"

"It is, senor."

"How know you this?"

"I went in my canoe under the stern of the brig, and drew myself up to the cabin stern ports, and while there the Sea Wolf came into the basin, and Captain Meredith came on board the Huntress with Merle Monte, the condemned Middy."

"I did not hear what was said, but he surrendered the vessels to the cruiser's captain, and with them Brandt, the Buccaneer."

"Ha! then at last he will meet his fate!"

"Yes, senor."

"Well, tell me more that you saw, Peon."

"I only saw the boats leave the brig, and the crew of the Sea Wolf placed in charge of the prizes."

"And who were in the boats?"

"Captain Monte and his men."

"By Jove! what a chance we have missed to take the Gold Ship in the absence of her crew."

"Yes, senor, but we did not know that the crew of the Gold Ship had charge of the pirate vessels."

"True; but you know where the Gold Ship lies at anchor?"

"Yes, senor, I saw her last night."

"How far away?"

"Half a league from here, senor."

"Peon, we have sixty men on board; do you think it possible to capture that craft?"

"Her armament is heavier than ours, senor."

"Yes, but I mean in our boats?"

"She has a crew of sixty men, senor."

"But we have the advantage of a surprise."

"If we can surprise them, senor."

"How far does she lie from the shore?"

"In the center of the lagoon, senor, which is about a hundred yards wide."

"And the banks?"

"Are overhung with trees, senor."

"Then we can muffle our oars, pull ourselves along under the overhanging branches, and dash out upon the craft, and I believe can capture her."

"We can but try, senor."

"I will call up the crew, and if we are successful the cruise of the Sea Marauder shall end, for we will get gold enough to suit the most avaricious heart."

"Go below, Peon, and order the men on deck," and the officer turned and descended into the cabin of the Sea Marauder, in which burned a bright light.

CHAPTER V.

THE PRISONERS OF A PIRATE.

THE officer who entered the cabin of the Sea Marauder paused as he reached the last step of the companionway, and threw aside his belt and cloak.

His face and form were thereby fully revealed, and while the latter was elegant and graceful, the former was noble in expression, and no such countenance as one would look for in one who held command on a pirate deck.

He was dressed in a uniform that was somewhat fanciful in appearance, and wore a belt containing two pistols and a sword, the hilt of the latter being gem-studded.

His face was youthful, for he could scarcely have passed his twenty-fifth year; but it was resolute, fearless, handsome, and, as I have said, was not marred by the impress of a life of crime.

The cabin was one of luxurious surroundings, and certainly most inviting as a retreat, for a velvet carpet and rich rugs covered the floor, paintings were hung here and there, wherever space offered, ottomans, sofas and easy-chairs were scattered about, and a table under a swinging lamp had on it a rich silver service for wines and refreshments, and a few books.

Upon either side of the table was seated a person, each of whom glanced up at the appearance of the young officer.

The one was a man of striking appearance, dressed in a kind of sea uniform, and with a face that was very dark, and almost forbiddingly stern.

The other was a young girl of fifteen, perhaps, though there was that about her in calm dignity and roundness of form, which caused her to appear older.

Her face was one of rare beauty, though now within her lustrous eyes dwelt a look of sadness, commingled with anxiety.

"Pardon my intrusion, Mr. Branch, upon yourself and daughter, but knowing that you had not yet retired, I sought you for a little talk," said the pirate officer in a tone of marked courtesy.

"Be seated, Lieutenant Murell, for, since we have been your prisoners, your kindness to us has been such that we have no need to dread your presence," returned the gentleman.

"Thank you, sir; but I have done that which I deemed to be my duty toward you, for, though cruel circumstances over which I had little control, drove me to a pirate's deck, I yet have not forgotten what is due to my fellow-beings in their distress."

"This sentiment does you honor, sir, and I would that you felt it in your power to release my daughter and myself upon the ransom I offer."

"I am not, sir, unfortunately, my own master, as you know, and Captain Pierre, who went up to the city in the very fishing-smack from which he took yourself and daughter, demanded that I keep you until his return, having refused the offer of ransom you then made, and which I deemed most generous."

"I can offer no larger sum, sir," coldly said the gentleman.

"So you have said, sir, and I believe you."

"The truth is, I am not now a rich man, and having been captured by Brandt the Buccaneer, who seized the vessel upon which I sailed, and afterward picked up a boat in which was my child here, I had to buy our freedom from him, and have now but the gems I offer you."

"I cannot accept them, sir, I am sorry to say; but as I have a grain of hope for you, I have come to make it known."

"Oh, sir, what hope have you?" cried the young girl, in a rich, pleading voice.

"I will tell you:

"I have a Peon Indian on board, who is a perfect seaman, and in his light skiff goes almost anywhere he desires to."

"While fishing, two days ago, in the mouth of the lagoon, I saw a vessel run in toward a secret bayou up the coast, and almost at the same time a brig and a cutter seek a haven down the coast."

"I returned to the schooner, and sent Peon as a spy to discover just what the vessels were, for two of them I felt sure I recognized."

"He returned from up the coast with the news that the vessel there was the Gold Ship."

"Ha! that craft!" and the gentleman half sprung from his seat.

"Do you know the mysterious vessel, Mr. Branch?"

"Only as a craft that is said to contain immense treasure, and which Brandt the Buccaneer was continually searching for, while I was a prisoner on board."

"Well, sir, the Gold Ship is now at anchor in a lagoon not half a league from here."

"By Heaven! what a chance to capture her!" said Basil Branch excitedly.

"The pirate lieutenant smiled, and continued:

"But to the other vessels, sir."

"Ah, yes."

"The Peon went last night to discover the cause of their presence on the coast, and returned only a few minutes ago and made his report."

"And he found them?"

"He did, Mr. Branch, and one was a Mexican cutter captured by a Captain Eduardo, and which he turned into a pirate craft."

"I have heard of this craft."

"She is known as the Gold Hunter, and a seaman who joined us, or rather Brandt's vessel, reported that she was cruising in search of the Gold Ship, but at the same time boarded and robbed any defenseless vessel found on the high seas; but the other craft, Lieutenant Mur-ll?"

"Was the brig Huntress?"

"Ha! the vessel of Brandt the Buccaneer?"

"The same, sir."

"And Brandt?"

"Is a prisoner, sir."

"Great God! you astonish me!" and Basil Branch arose and paced the cabin in an excited way, that surprised both his daughter and the pirate officer, and which caused the former to say calmly:

"Father, why do you allow this news of Brandt the Buccaneer to so unnerve you?"

The man flushed, then paled, and throwing himself again in his chair, answered in a low tone:

"It is surprise and joy at feeling that Brandt is at last in chains, and will meet his fate; but, lieutenant," he continued:

"Who was the captor of the brig?"

"Merle Monte, sir, the commander of the Gold Ship."

"No!"

"It is true, sir, for while Peon was there the American cruiser Sea Wolf swept into the inlet, and the Condemned Midshipman surrendered the cutter of Captain Eduardo, and the Huntress, with Brandt, to Captain Meredith."

"This is astounding."

"It is indeed, sir; but, as Merle Monte has just retired to his vessel in his boat, and certainly will not put to sea to-night, I have decided to go and attack her."

"A bold plot, sir, but have you the men to carry it out?"

"I have sixty men."

"And the Gold Ship?"

"Peon reports her with a crew of threescore; but I rely much on my surprising her."

"Does she lie in a position that will give you that advantage?"

"She does, my spy reports."

"Then by all means attack her, and I will aid you," said Basil Branch with enthusiasm.

"It was to ask you to do this, sir, that I sought you here, for I have no officer to aid me, as we suffered severely awhile ago, in escaping from the Sea Wolf."

"You may rely upon me, sir."

"Thank you, sir, and if we capture the Gold Ship I will release yourself and daughter upon my own responsibility, feeling that the treasure thus gained will more than repay my captain for your loss."

"And should I fall, sir?" and Basil Branch glanced in a significant manner toward his daughter.

"I will regard Miss Branch as my own sister, sir, until I can return her to her friends."

"And should you fall, lieutenant, will your men release us?"

"I will give my orders to that effect, Mr. Branch, and Peon will see that they are carried out."

"Enough, I am ready."

"I will call you, sir, when the boats are ready."

"Farewell, Miss Branch, and hope for the best," and Vance Murrell, the pirate lieutenant, left the father and daughter alone in the cabin.

CHAPTER VI.

A BLACK SPY.

WITHOUT any adventure, Merle Monte returned to his vessel, which, as the Peon spy from the Sea Marauder had reported, lay at an-

chor in a lagoon, some half mile from its mouth.

The lagoon was deep, the banks were heavily fringed with trees, and the spot was a dismal one, but a secure retreat, from prying eyes on any vessel cruising along the coast, in search of craft that might be of a suspicious character.

The watchful lookout on the Gold Ship sighted the boats, and promptly reported their coming to the officer in charge, who was the former captain of the Galveston packet schooner, which had been wrecked in a storm, with Mrs. Branch and her daughter on board, but who, with those of his crew that had been picked up by the treasure craft, had willingly united their fortunes with those of Merle Monte.

Recognizing the boats as those from the schooner, Lieutenant Trenor, the former merchant captain, called down the companionway:

"Ho, Mezrak!"

"Ay, ay, sir," and there appeared in the companionway, where the cabin lights fell full upon him, the form of a negro.

Black as ebony, deformed in shape, for his legs were short, his body stout and arms of great length, and with a head of massive size, the person who answered to the name of Mezrak was one to be feared by those who would bring his anger upon them.

An Abyssinian slave, he was the one who had reared Merle Monte from infancy, and he loved his young master far more than all else on earth, while he seemed to almost hate the rest of mankind.

He was clad in a rich Persian costume, gems of rare beauty glittered upon his huge fingers, and in spite of his appearance he seemed a dandy in dress and love of ornaments.

He wore a pair of pistols in his sash, and a superb cimeter hung from his belt, the hilt glittering with precious stones.

"Your master is coming, Mezrak, and will doubtless need supper," called out Lieutenant Trenor, to the slave.

"Ay, ay, sir, I will prepare it," answered Mezrak, in his deep tones.

A few moments after the boats touched the schooner's side, and Merle Monte was met by his lieutenant.

Aiding Mrs. Branch on deck, Merle said:

"Have the boats hauled up, Mr. Trenor, and get all in readiness to sail at daybreak."

"Ay, ay, Captain Monte," responded the officer, and he at once gave the necessary orders, and while they were being obeyed paced to and fro.

After awhile Merle came on deck, and lighting a cigar handed one to his lieutenant, to whom he then told the story of his successful surrender of the two pirate vessels to the Sea Wolf.

"And Little Belt did not return?"

"No, and I will relieve you in her place to-night, so get what sleep you can."

"I hope no harm befell Lieutenant Little Belt, Captain Monte?"

"Oh, no, she but remained to go in the brig to New Orleans and witness the execution of Brandt, the Buccaneer, after which she will rejoin us."

"Poor woman, he has made her suffer fearfully," sighed Lieutenant Trenor.

"Yes, and soon she will be avenged for all her wrongs; but now seek rest, for we sail at dawn, and we must hunt down that Sea Marauder, for that is my one aim now, as her captain holds as prisoners the husband and daughter of poor Mrs. Branch."

The lieutenant made no reply but left the deck, and Merle Monte told the watch they could turn in and that he would remain up for the remainder of the night.

Pacing to and fro he became lost in deep reverie, until presently he started, for his quick ear had caught a strange sound.

It was not the cry of the night-birds on shore, nor the snort of the alligator, or croak of a frog, but a sound that had a strange meaning to him.

Stepping to the companionway he gave a low call, and instantly, Mezrak, the Abyssinian slave appeared.

"Well master?" asked Mezrak politely.

"I heard a sound over in the foliage, down the stream some few cables' length; listen and see if you hear it."

Mezrak listened attentively, and for a moment stood thus in silence.

Then he said quietly:

"Master, I hear the splash of oars."

"I heard a sound, Mezrak, as though an oar had broken, and I must be right in believing there is a boat coming up the stream."

"Yes, master, but if so the oars are muffled. Mezrak will see."

Instantly he cast aside his turban and elegant costume, and slipping over the side dropped noiselessly into the water. Merle went to the side and watched him, for he knew the danger he ran in that lagoon, where alligators had their haunts.

But Mezrak seemed to dread no danger, and swam rapidly away toward the shore.

For minutes, which seemed almost hours, Merle awaited, looking searchingly out over the dark waters.

At last he beheld a ripple upon the surface of the lagoon, then a dark object appeared, and next, Mezrak came over the side of the schooner.

"Well, Mezrak?" asked Merle quickly, for the rapid pace at which the slave had returned proved to him that he had made some discovery.

"Master, boats, filled with men are coming up the lagoon, and one awaits opposite the schooner, now, for the others to come."

"Ah! you have done well, Mezrak; but you always do that, my brave friend."

"Now call the men on deck, and tell them to make no sound, and I will call up Mr. Trenor and arm myself."

Merle spoke with the utmost calmness, and Mezrak quickly disappeared to obey his orders.

Entering the cabin the young captain was absent but a couple of minutes, and returning to the deck was accompanied by Lieutenant Trenor, both armed to the teeth.

The crew were coming rapidly and silently to their posts, arming themselves from the sword and pistol racks as they appeared, and five minutes after Mezrak's return to the schooner all was in readiness to greet the five, which the Black Spy had reported coming to them.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BOAT ATTACK.

FOR a short time only had the crew of the schooner to wait for their foes to show themselves, and yet it seemed an age to them, for they bided the moment breathlessly that must open a fierce conflict, and lay many of their number upon the deck.

The schooner swung starboard broadside to the dark shore, from which the attack was expected, and Merle took up his post on the quarter-deck near the wheel, while his Lieutenant Trenor, went forward.

Not far from Merle Monte was Mezrak, who had resumed his Persian garb once more, and exchanged his handsome blade with the gem-studded hilt, for one of a more business-like look, as far as its capability for killing was concerned.

He had also stuck two extra pistols in his belt, and thus armed was a most formidable looking antagonist.

The regard felt by Merle Monte for the deformed black was such that he ever wanted to guard him from danger, if in his power, though he well knew Mezrak revelled in mad combat, as he said to him:

"Mezrak, had you not better keep in the cabin, to protect Mrs. Branch, should the fight go against us on deck?"

"If master so wishes," calmly responded Mezrak.

"It is my wish, Mezrak."

The slave simply bowed and made his way to the companionway, and even entered the cabin, where he found Mrs. Branch quite anxious regarding the expected attack from unknown foes.

To keep her mind occupied, Mezrak suggested that she load a number of pistols, and place them convenient for use during the fight, and the brave woman at once set to work at the task.

"There they come, lads."

"Await my order to fire," said Merle, in a low tone, and his words were passed forward, just as four dark objects came out from under the shadow of the shore and moved swiftly toward the schooner.

It was evident that those in the boats expected to completely surprise the Gold Ship, for they came on with a rush, and though their oars were muffled, the blades splashed loudly in the water.

"Ho! there, boats!"

Merle hailed in ringing tones, that sent a thrill through his crew, for they awaited the order that soon must come.

Involuntarily, as they heard the clarion voice

the oarsmen paused upon their oars, but gave way again with a will, as a stern voice answered:

"Pull, you devils, and board before the crew can come on deck! Then raising his voice, the same speaker answered Merle's hail with:

"Ahoy, the schooner!"

"What boats are those?" cried Merle.

"From the American cruiser Sea Wolf!"

"Keep off, or I'll fire into you," ordered Merle, sternly, convinced that the man spoke falsely.

"Pull, devils, all together, and the schooner is ours!" were the words then heard, and with a wild yell from their crews, the four boats dashed upon the schooner.

"Fire!"

In answer to Merle's ringing command, the whole starboard bulwark of the Gold Ship seemed to be a line of fire, and sixty muskets flashed forth a shower of leaden hail.

Then came the pattering of bullets against wood, the splashing of oars in the water, shrieks of agony, groans, curses and shouts of the officers to "seize the Gold Ship and show no mercy!"

The next instant two of the boats struck the side of the schooner, and their crews threw themselves upon the deck, and at once a fierce and most sanguinary fight began, assailants and defenders becoming locked together in a hand-to-hand conflict.

The attacking party realized that where they had expected to surprise their foe, they had been surprised by finding that foe prepared for them; but the goal for which they fought was the far-famed Gold Ship, the capture of which would make all of them rich, and they determined to win or die.

Their young leader, Vance Murell, was the first man upon the schooner's deck, and he fought with a courage that set his men a good example, and they rallied around him with a will.

He had boarded aft, and consequently was opposed to Merle Monte and his defenders, and the fight became most desperate.

Forward, Basil Branch had boarded the schooner with thirty men at his back, and he fought with desperation, for he felt how much was at stake for him.

But from stem to stern of the schooner her crew were held in thorough discipline, and they met their foes with a cool courage that could not be broken.

If outnumbered, they yet cared not for that, and never swerved when the other two boats came alongside and boarded.

As small-arms only were used, it was a fearful, striking spectacle, to see the beautiful schooner illumined fore and aft with the flashes of the pistols, which showed plainly the fight of desperation that was being waged upon her decks.

Then, too, was heard the clash of steel meeting steel, and groans, curses, cheers, and stern orders mingled together.

At last the schooner's crew began to slightly waver when out of the companionway darted a black form, and his hands seemed to hold fire in them, so rapidly did he fire pistol after pistol, as he rushed upon the attacking party.

"Hold, Mezrak!" cried Merle, as he saw his faithful slave hurl himself into the midst of the enemy.

"Come, men, follow me, or he'll be slain!"

"Come, I say, for if he is harmed not one atom of mercy shall be shown those devils," shouted Merle, and he sprung into the breach made by Mezrak, and before whom the assailants shrunk away as from a demon.

Backed by his men the onslaught of Merle, in going to the aid of Mezrak, was irresistible, in fact, overwhelming, and the boats' crews were panic-stricken, and turning, sprung over the side in wild flight.

In vain did Vance Murell, the pirate lieutenant, and his ally in the attack, Basil Branch, strive to stay the current, for their men would not remain longer, and seeing that all was lost they too sought to escape to the boats.

It was a mad stampede, and but three of the boats got away from the schooner's side, the fourth having been captured by Mezrak, who sprang into it, and threw overboard those who had there sought refuge.

And those three, still under the fire of their foes, pulled swiftly for the shelter of the dark shores, when they turned their prows down the lagoon, and kept up their wild flight.

But, ere they reached the open water they beheld the sails unfurled upon the Gold Ship, and spread above her decks like huge white wings, while the beautiful craft sped seaward

at a swift pace, as though anxious to leave quickly astern the scene of carnage, which had dyed red the dark waters of the sluggish lagoon.

CHAPTER VIII.

AT A PIRATE'S MERCY.

IT was with the most intense anxiety that Pearl Branch awaited the return of her father, who had gone with the boats to attack the Gold Ship.

So far she had not suspected her father's complicity with Brandt, the Buccaneer, so carefully had both he and the pirate chief guarded the secret that he was really an officer upon the Huntress, and not a passenger as he had said, en route to Galveston on the packet brig when she was seized and turned into an outlaw craft.

His gambling having brought him to the verge of ruin, Basil Branch, in sheer desperation had turned to piracy, hoping in a short time to redeem his fallen fortunes, build up his estates again, and spend his latter days in what comfort he could with his wife and daughter, for his conscience carried a painful load upon it.

But a bitter foe was upon his path in the captain of the Sea Marauder, who sought to revenge slighted love and his hatred of a successful rival, and had inveigled Mrs. Branch and Pearl away from home, under pretense that Basil Branch had sent for them.

The wreck of the vessel, upon which they took passage, followed, the separation of mother and daughter, the former being left upon the sinking hulk, with her pretended friend but real foe, and the picking up of the boat, in which was Pearl, by the vessel of Brandt, the Buccaneer, when the maiden and her father came face to face.

In the mean time the wreck had been righted by the Gold Ship, and Mrs. Branch, Pierre, her pretended friend, and the captain taken from it, and then the capture of Brandt, the Buccaneer, came about, and the poor mother learned that her husband and child had been released and sent to New Orleans, to immediately after hear that they had been again captured, and this time by the Sea Marauder, whose captain she little dreamed was none other than Pierre, the pretended friend, that had mysteriously disappeared from the Gold Ship one night, when it was anchored off an inlet, awaiting the dawn to run in and attack the pirate vessel reported to be hiding inshore.

While the suspense-haunted mother was cruising in the Gold Ship, in search of the Sea Marauder, that trim little craft, as the reader knows, was hidden within less than a league of her, and sending her boats out to attack the very vessel that was looking for her.

After the capture of the smack, upon which was Basil Branch and Pearl, Captain Pierre, the one who sought to avenge fancied wrongs in the past, had recognized his enemy and his daughter, and not wishing to be seen by them, had left them in charge of his lieutenant, with orders to hold them prisoners until his return from the city, whither he went to secure heavier guns and more men, with which to hunt down the treasure craft of Merle Monte.

The lieutenant had obeyed orders by running for the Lost Pond, where the reader has seen the Sea Marauder hidden away; but though circumstances had made him an outlaw, his heart was not wholly warped from good, and he had pitied both Basil Branch and Pearl.

Most kindly had he treated them, and he was anxious to give them their freedom; but he was left in command by Captain Pierre, and would not betray him, so he plotted some way in which they could go free and not compromise him.

The maiden had interested him from the first, and the more he saw of her the more his heart warmed toward her, until he was determined to take a bold step for her release from the power of his cruel chief, and that step he decided upon when he learned through his spy, Peon, that the Gold Ship was anchored near.

Could he capture that vessel, loaded with fabulous wealth, he felt it would be full recompense to Captain Pierre for allowing his prisoners to go free, especially as he would tell him Basil Branch had ably seconded him in the attack.

The reader has seen how his best laid plans fell through by the determined defense of the crew of the Gold Ship, whose crew was not as large as the Peon had reported, and was really outnumbered by the men from the Sea Marauder; but that the treasure craft would have been taken is certain, but for the quick ear of her boy commander and the valuable services rendered as spy by Mezrak, who again proved a power of strength at the critical moment of the fight.

To poor Pearl, knowing, or believing that she did, the motive that prompted her father to join in the attack, the hours passed their weary length along.

She believed that her father was actuated wholly by a desire for her release and his own, and had thus volunteered, when really his eyes were fastened upon the Gold Ship with hope of gain, for he had in his possession proof that he was one of Brandt's lieutenants, which, if compelled to show what he really was, he felt assured would gain his freedom and his daughter's upon the return of the captain of the Sea Marauder, for he little knew that he was a foe of his of long years' standing.

The Gold Ship Pearl had looked upon, from all that she had heard, as little better than a pirate, and her commander a Condemned Midshipman who had mutinied and then escaped death at the yard-arm by flight.

Hence she did not deem the attack upon her to be unlawful on the part of her father.

Unable to sleep, she paced the cabin nervously, counting the moments as they dragged along, and starting at every sound.

Upon the vessel had been left but four men, for Vance Murell knew there was no need of a guard there, and these she did not see nor hear, and therefore her position was one of abject loneliness and gloom.

At last she started, for she heard the quick dip of oars, then a low order, and next came feet upon the deck.

She tried to spring toward the companionway, but was unable to move.

"Had her father returned?"

"Had her father been killed?"

"Had the Gold Ship been captured?"

"If so, would her father and herself be set free?"

Such were the thoughts and questions chasing themselves in rapid succession through her brain, and like a statue, bent forward, hands clasped, eyes staring at the companionway, she stood and waited in breathless suspense.

A quick step crossed the deck, another order was given, and in the voice of Vance Murell, the pirate lieutenant, and then she saw feet descending the companionway steps.

Yet still she could not move or utter a cry.

Then a form appeared. It was that of the pirate lieutenant.

She seemed to read the sad look upon his face and gasped forth:

"My father!"

"Alas! Miss Branch, it pains my heart to tell you that he did not return with us," said the pirate officer sadly.

"Is he a prisoner?" she hoarsely whispered.

"I think not, for I saw him turn to take to the boats with us, when we were beaten off."

"Then he is dead!"

She said the words hoarsely, and in the form of a question.

"Alas! I feel that it is so."

Believing that her mother had gone down with the wreck, and that her father was dead, poor Pearl cried bitterly:

"Oh God! I am all alone in the world, and worse still, I am at the mercy of a pirate."

She swayed forward as she spoke, her eyes closed, and she would have fallen, had not Vance Murell sprung forward and caught her in his arms, while he cried in thrilling tones:

"No, no, my beautiful Pearl, you are not all alone, for I will live for you and be your very slave."

But she heard not his words, for she had sunk into a deep swoon that seemed akin to death.

CHAPTER IX.

A GOOD DEED REMEMBERED.

WHEN aroused to resistance, Mezrak, the slave of Merle Monte, was a very demon, and as merciless as a tiger.

Hence, when the crew of the Sea Marauder turned to fly to their boats and escape, he had pressed them hard, and had cut them down with his huge cimeter without the slightest mercy.

One of the attacking party he had dragged backward upon the deck, just as he sprung upon the bulwark, and the next instant his head would have been severed from the body, had not the prostrate and wounded man fired a pistol almost in his face.

The bullet missed its aim, as it struck the blade of the cimeter and glanced off, doing no harm; but the flash of the discharge had illumined the face of the prostrate man and instantly the murderous blade was stayed in its deadly work.

Mezrak was one who never forgot a face, met

under circumstances where there was cause to remember it.

The man whom he was about to kill he had met before, and what is more, he recognized in him one who had once befriended him.

His mind flashed back to the scene some time before, when a vagabond crowd had pursued him in New Orleans, jeering his deformities and threatening him with violence.

Had he turned upon them he could have killed many before he was subdued, but his death would have followed, and knowing it, he kept down his temper and suffered the abuse, though now and then a stone would strike him and cause the blood to flow.

Suddenly a carriage appeared upon the scene and drew up, while a handsome, dark, stern-faced man dismounted and instantly commanded the crowd to desist.

They had jeered the deformed black, but they fell back before the bold man who confronted them, and he bade Mezrak enter his carriage and at once drove him to the pier off which lay the Sea Wolf, on board of which Merle Monte was then a midshipman.

The man now prostrate before him was his bold rescuer that day long before, and by the flash of the pistol Mezrak had recognized him and spared his life, and seeing that he was wounded, he raised him in his strong arms and bore him aft.

CHAPTER X.

THE WOUNDED PRISONER.

"MASTER, spare this man for my sake, for though our foe now, he is the one who served me well long ago, the day the crowd hooted me in New Orleans," said Mezrak.

"Certainly, Mezrak, if he served you once he is my friend now, not my foe.

"Bear him into the cabin, as he seems wounded, and look to him," answered Merle.

Mezrak bore the wounded man into the cabin and placed him upon a lounge, and then hastily returned to the deck, for he did not consider his work there finished.

He found the Gold Ship's crew clearing the deck of the dead pirates, by robbing them and then throwing the bodies overboard.

Driven to frenzy by the attack upon his master and his vessel, Mezrak set the example at once of hurling the wounded as well into the lagoon, and ere Merle Monte, who was quickly told of the act of his maddened slave, could get forward to prevent, the last one of the pirates had sunk beneath the dark waters.

Boats were lowered and an effort made to save them; but too late, as they were unable to keep up, wounded as they were.

"Mezrak, you have grieved and angered me," said Merle, sternly, laying his hand hard upon the arm of the black.

"Master, they sought your life and your inheritance, and they did not deserve to live, and had they lived to recover, it would be but to die upon the yard-arm," was Mezrak's reply.

"Still you did wrong, and I cannot easily forget it, Mezrak."

"Alas! master, do not be angry with your poor slave," said the black, in a low tone that quivered with emotion.

"I believed you in the cabin, caring for the wounded man whom you saved."

"He served me, master, and I would not see him die."

"Forgive Mezrak, master," and the slave stretched forth his huge hand.

Merle grasped it warmly, and instantly the negro dropped to the deck and pressed his lips upon his master's feet.

"Rise, Mezrak, and see to the wounded man in the cabin."

"And I am forgiven, master?"

"Yes, Mezrak."

Instantly the slave sprung to his feet, and walked toward the cabin, while Merle, anxious to find the vessel from which the boats had come to attack him, at once ordered the schooner gotten under sail, and away sped the fleet craft seaward, determined to stand off and on along the coast to await the coming of day, when a search would be made for their foe.

If a cruiser, Merle knew the Gold Ship could run away from it.

If a pirate, he would fight it, and who really were his assailants he had no means of knowing, for Mezrak had disposed of the wounded too quickly to find out from them.

As the schooner was gliding out of the lagoon, and feeling the waves of the Gulf under her bows, there came from the cabin a wild shriek, which quickly caused Merle to seek to know its cause.

"Gain an offing, Mr. Trenor, and keep her off

and on," he called out to his Lieutenant, as he hesitated an instant before dashing down the companionway.

Upon entering the cabin a strange scene met his gaze.

Upon a lounge lay the wounded man, whom Mezrak had placed there, and bending over him was Mrs. Branch, her form trembling convulsively, and low moans coming from her lips.

Above them stood Mezrak, calm and silent. The wounded man seemed conscious, for his eyes were open, and he grasped his wife's hand, but his face had on it the hue of death.

Seeing his master enter, Mezrak said, calmly: "Master, it is the husband of this lady that I have saved."

Merle was thunderstruck, and calmly walked forward to where the wife bent over her husband, whom she had so strangely found.

CHAPTER XI.

HOPE AND DESPAIR.

SEEING Merle come forward, Basil Branch, for he was the wounded man whom Mezrak had saved, turned his eyes upon him, and the look caused Mrs. Branch to start, and glance over her shoulder.

"Oh, Captain Monte, I have found my husband," she cried, eagerly.

Then she continued, speaking rapidly and nervously:

"I saw Mezrak bring him into the cabin and lay him here, and I feared at first that it was you."

"But I knew that it could not be when I saw his dress, or Lieutenant Trenor either, and yet my eyes seemed to be riveted upon his form."

"For a long time he lay silent, and so motionless that I deemed him dead."

"Then Mezrak came down and bent over him to dress his wound, and I heard him groan with agony, and then speak."

"His voice told me who it was, and springing forward, I found my ears had not deceived me, for see, it is my husband."

"Yes, my dear madam, and I rejoice that you have found him; but come, I know something of surgery, and Mezrak is well skilled in the cure of wounds, so we will take him in charge now, and you can nurse him back to life."

"But he will live, will he not, Captain Monte?" eagerly asked the poor woman.

"I have every hope that he will, Mrs. Branch; but he must be kept perfectly quiet, as the wound is in a dangerous position— See! he has become unconscious."

Merle then drew aside the clothing, and the act revealed a bullet wound in the left side.

That it had not touched the heart was evident by the wounded man being yet alive; but that it was most dangerous was also true.

A word to Mezrak caused him to bring to his master a case of surgical instruments, and breathlessly Mrs. Branch watched the amateur surgeon as he probed for the bullet.

Now and then the wounded man winced and groaned under the pain; but Merle Monte was as gentle as a woman in his touch, and soon drew out the bullet.

"Thank God!" fervently said the sorrowing wife, while Mezrak gave a grunt of satisfaction at this result.

Then the wound was skillfully dressed, the invalid made as comfortable as was possible, and the wife left to nurse her husband, while Mezrak remained near to be of any service should he be needed.

Returning to the deck, Merle Monte found all ship-shape once more, for the dead had been buried in the sea, the wounded put in the sick-bay, and the schooner's decks washed clean.

Lieutenant Trenor held the deck, and the beautiful vessel, under the pressure of a five-knot breeze off-shore, was standing off and on, running about half a league each side of the lagoon on each tack, as the vessel from which the boats had come must certainly be not far away, the officer had thought.

With the first appearance of dawn the schooner was cleared for action, the men went to quarters, and every eye on the Gold Ship was searching for a foe.

Knowing that the water was of sufficient depth to permit it, Merle ran closer inshore, and then would luff up and send a boat in to search the inlets, and the lagoons as fast as they dared venture.

In this way he began the long hunt for his foe, whoever that foe might be, for, as Basil Branch yet remained unconscious, and his life hung by a thread, Merle had not found out that

his assailants were from the very vessel for which he was so anxiously searching.

True, knowing that Basil Branch and his daughter had been captured by the Sea Marauder, a certain suspicion would cross his mind that the boats had come from that vessel; but then he hooted the idea, when he thought that it would be next to impossible for the wounded man to be fighting with the very pirates who were the captors of himself and child, and he preferred to think that the Sea Marauder had been captured by an English cruiser, the two captives released, and that the planter had joined their crew in the assault on the Gold Ship believing it to be another buccaneer.

Yet, if such was the case, where was the cruiser from whence the boats had come?

He had noticed in the fight, that the assailants seemed to wear the English sailors' garb, and he had particularly observed the very gallant manner in which Basil Branch had fought; but he knew that there was no English cruiser on the coast then that should be afraid to meet the Gold Ship in combat, and he was in a deep quandary as to why the mysterious and unknown vessel did not boldly run out and fight him.

If he knew it to be a man-of-war, he would not fight, but run, for he was determined to do no act of outlawry, although a fugitive, condemned to death by his Government.

But, should the stranger prove the Marauder, or any other outlaw craft, most gladly would he give it combat.

Knowing well, that as he sailed without the flag of any nation above his decks, and that as a havenless craft all vessels of war considered him fair game, yet he trusted to the speed of his schooner to escape from them, and only in the last moment would have used his guns to protect himself, his treasure and his crew.

As the boats had been the assailants, he was determined to find out to what they belonged, and, if it proved to be an outlaw craft, then he would do all in his power to haul down its black flag, and thereby gain another point in his favor with his Government, to which he had not cast off his allegiance, though it had cast him off, and, more still, branded him as a mutineer, a condemned officer and a deserter.

But though seemingly every inlet along the coast for miles was searched, and days were passed in the work, no trace of the boats, or the craft from which they had come could be found and Merle determined to continue his cruise in the Gulf, in his search for the Sea Marauder.

In those days of search, Mrs. Branch had bent over her husband, hoping for his life to be spared, and yet fearing that he would die, and most kindly through all had both Merle and Mezrak aided her in nursing him.

At last, just as hope of finding the mysterious enemy was given up, and hope of the recovery of Basil Branch became certain, despair seemed to seize upon the poor wife, who had asked, as soon as her husband dared speak a word:

"Where did you leave our child?"

Hardly audible was the answer, and the words came slowly; but the despairing woman, Merle and Mezrak heard them:

"On board the pirate craft known as the Sea Marauder."

CHAPTER XII.

BASIL BRANCH TELLS HIS STORY.

WITH these words, which brought despair to the fond mother's heart, for it told her that her beloved child was in the power of a pirate, Basil Branch could say no more.

He seemed too deeply moved to utter another word, and those who watched over him dared not ask him more for fear the thread of life would break, and the good wife recognized this and forbore from asking, though her anxiety was intense.

And on sped the Gold Ship on its cruise, anxious eyes searching the horizon day and night for some trace of the Sea Marauder, upon which the hopes of all were now centered.

At last Basil Branch was pronounced out of danger by Merle Monte, for the crisis had passed and he called to his wife that he wished to tell her all.

Merle and Mezrak would have left the cabin, but the wounded man and his wife urged that they should remain.

"I have wanted to speak before," he said, in a low tone.

"But I dared not trust myself to do so, for

fear I would break down, and I do not wish to die.

"I have said that our poor Pearl was in the power of a pirate, and she is; for, craft Brandt the Buccaneer released us, and we were on the way in a small coaster up to the city, we were retaken by the Sea Marauder.

"You have told me, Annabel, when I dared not speak, how you and Pearl were inveigled from home by a foe of mine, and of your being wrecked, and knowing that Brandt had seized the packet-brig Montezuma, upon which I was a prisoner, and then picked up the boat in which was Pearl.

"All this is true; but Brandt let us go free, bad as men say he is, and we fell into the clutches of this pirate, Captain Pierre.

"Upon the very smack, from which he took us, he went on to the city, pretending to the skipper that he was a rich gentleman who had been captured and released upon payment of ransom.

"Neither myself or Pearl saw him; but he left us, and his vessel, in charge of his first officer, a dashing, handsome young man, and a gentleman in manner, whatever his crimes may be.

"He ordered the lieutenant to a secret retreat he called the Lost Pond, on the coast some leagues from the Mississippi Delta, and thither we went, while he visited New Orleans to get more men and several heavier guns for his truly splendid little vessel, that he might cruise in search of the Gold Ship, and finding her, be able to capture her.

"The lieutenant refused the bribes I offered him, to free us, for he would not betray his commander; but he learned, through an Indian spy that his vessel was near, and he determined to capture her.

"He believed, if he could take the Gold Ship, he would be freely forgiven for setting Pearl and myself free, which was his intention, for he seemed to be a noble fellow and pitied us, well knowing the cruel nature of his commander.

"Being short of officers, he asked my aid, and I, looking upon this vessel as the world believes it, to be little less than a pirate, willingly consented, especially as upon our success depended our freedom.

"I therefore took command of two of the pirate boats, under Lieutenant Murell, and the result you know.

"He, and those of his crew not killed and wounded retreated to the boats and escaped when beaten back by you, Captain Monte, and I remained behind, and our daughter is in the hands of the pirates, who must have reported me as dead."

"But, from what you say, sir, of this young pirate lieutenant, there is every reason to believe that he will act with honor, now that she is so wholly in his power," said Merle.

"Of that, sir, I have no doubt, pirate though he is; but his captain may have returned, and I know what he is."

There was a certain significance in his tone and words, in referring to the Sea Marauder, that impressed those who heard him with the idea that he knew more of the outlaw chief than he had admitted, and Mrs. Branch asked in a low tone:

"Do you know this Captain Pierre, Basil?"

"I do, Annabel."

"Has he come to hate you?"

"He has."

"How know you this?"

"From certain things I saw, that belonged to him on the schooner, I discovered just who this Captain Pierre Dupont of the Sea Marauder is."

"*Pierre Dupont?*" cried Mrs. Branch, starting up.

"Yes."

"Why, Basil, that was the name of the man who professed to have been sent by you, for Pearl and myself."

"I know it."

"He told us to call him Pierre, and we did so; but his name was Pierre Dupont."

"And that explains the mystery of his deserting the Gold Ship, the night we lay off that inlet, waiting to run in with dawn and attack the pirate vessel reported at anchor there," said Merle.

"Yes, it was his vessel, and he escaped by swimming to it, and, in the darkness got his boats out with muffled oars, and towed to sea," replied Basil Branch, and he added:

"This his lieutenant told me, and more, for he said that his captain had gone to New Orleans and sent down word to him to lie in wait for the Galveston packet schooner Flyaway and capture her, and that he would find him, and more valuable prisoners passengers on board.

"The schooner, so says the Lieutenant Murell, had given chase to the Flyaway, which was a very nimble-footed craft, and had escaped him in a storm that had come on."

"That is true, every word of it, and this Pierre, or Dupont, tried all he could to make Captain Trenor believe that the schooner in chase was an American cruiser.

"That night the Flyaway was wrecked, and you know the rest," said Mrs. Branch.

"Well, I know just who this Captain Pierre Dupont is, Annabel," responded Basil Branch.

"And who is he, Basil?"

"Do you remember that I once detected a man, I believed to be a gentleman, and who was so looked upon, in cheating his opponent in a game of cards, on which hung a heavy stake?"

"I do remember him," said Mrs. Branch in a low tone.

"That man was the one your father had selected for your husband, though I believe you did not love him; but my exposure of his rascality sent him in dishonor from his circle of friends, and he went from bad to worse, until he became the head of a band of river pirates, known as the Mississippi Marauders.

"One night, Captain Monte, I rescued my wife here, and her father, from that band.

"Mr. Tracey, Annabel's father, was severely wounded, and I had him taken to my plantation home, The Retreat, and there he died."

"It was the very night, too, that your father died, Basil, and you were standing on the river-bank, sorrowing for his loss, when you heard the fighting upon the river, and came to our rescue; but are you ill?" and Mrs. Branch sprung toward her husband, who had suddenly become livid.

"No, no, it is a passing weakness," he said, quickly.

"Perhaps we are taxing your strength too much," suggested Merle.

"No; let us have it over with now," he murmured, and then he continued, and in a stronger voice:

"Well, your old lover, Annabel, led those Marauders that night, and escaped by swimming ashore, though he was wounded by me.

"It was reported that he was killed that night, and so we all believed, as you know, but what I discovered upon the Sea Marauder proved to me that her captain is none other than—"

"*Dupont Pierson!*" almost shrieked Mrs. Branch.

"Yes, and he has changed his name of Dupont Pierson to *Pierre Dupont*, and that of Marauder of the Mississippi, to *The Sea Marauder*."

"Now I recall him, though his long beard, and the changes in his face that seventeen or eighteen years have made, made him unknown to me then as Pierre," said Mrs. Branch.

"Yes, he is an old foe, and, when in his power to accomplish it well, he sought revenge against us, and though you and I have escaped him, Annabel, our child is in his power."

CHAPTER XIII.

A MYSTERY SOLVED.

THESE were crushing thoughts for the poor mother and the father, to feel that Pearl, their beautiful daughter, was at the mercy of their old foe, who sought revenge against them.

True, Basil Branch took some hope in the thought of what he knew of Vance Murell, the pirate lieutenant, and felt that he would protect Pearl all in his power.

Yet still he feared for the worst, and earnestly urged Merle Monte to do all in his power to capture the Sea Marauder.

As he had been allowed the freedom of the deck on the schooner, and even to fish in the lagoon, when Pearl was on the vessel, he felt he could again find the Lost Pond, and he begged Merle to head at once for that part of the coast, and, by the time they reached there, he would be well enough to be lowered into a small boat and make the search at least.

This Merle decided to do, as something might have detained Captain Pierre in the city and the schooner yet be awaiting his coming in the Lost Pond.

Merle could also understand, from the description given of the place by Basil Branch, why he had been unable to find the little vessel.

At once, then, the Gold Ship was put about and headed for the neighborhood of the Delta of the Mississippi once more.

While en route, one pleasant day, Merle entered the cabin, and, telling Mrs. Branch to go on deck and get some fresh air, said that he would remain by the side of her husband.

She was utterly worn out with worry and nursing, and readily consented, and Merle threw himself into an easy-chair beside his guest.

"Mr. Branch," he said, after a few words on ordinary topics, "may I ask you what claim Brandt, the Buccaneer, had upon you?"

The wounded man turned very white, and for a moment did not reply.

Then he said:

"I do not understand you."

"I asked what claim Brandt, the Buccaneer, holds upon you?"

"None, sir," the wounded man said, with some indignation of tone.

"I believe you, sir; but when I last saw Brandt, the Buccaneer, when I parted with him on his way to the city to be tried and hanged, he asked me to do him a favor."

"Well, Captain Monte?"

"That favor was to send a message to New Orleans, to seek out one Basil Branch, a planter and a gambler, he said—"

"Sir!"

"Those were his words, Mr. Branch."

"Pray continue, sir," said the planter, with something very like a sneer in his tone.

"You shall hear all, sir."

"He asked that my messenger should seek you and make known to you that he was a prisoner on board the Sea Wolf."

"In Heaven's name, what good would that do him?"

"You are the best judge of that, Mr. Branch."

"Captain Monte, you deal in innuendoes."

"I will be more explicit, sir."

"When I captured Brandt and his men off Galveston, through the aid of your noble wife, who led him into a trap set for him, I brought him on board of this vessel in irons for safer keeping."

"In the state-room in which he was confined, Mezrak, my slave, found a roll of papers which he had evidently dropped there unintentionally."

"I have them here, and one is a letter from you to him, telling him that you will get him a crew to seize the brig, and see that her own men desert her from some cause."

"And also, that, as you are driven to despair by your losses at the gaming-table, and have beggared your wife and daughter, you will go with him as a lieutenant, to get money enough to raise your family above want once more, and that the world will know nothing of your sin, and those you love will be none the wiser."

"This letter, Mr. Branch, lets out the secret, solves the mystery, and more, another paper is a copy of instructions given you to go to New Orleans and get him more men and

heavier guns for his vessel, and meet him at a certain rendezvous.

"Then, on the bottom of this paper are these words in a note, written by Brandt:

"Poor Branch, he turned to piracy to save his family from want, though his own hand had beggared them.

"Now, though he now keeps this secret from his daughter, leaving her to believe he was my prisoner, and not my lieutenant, all will one day come out, for the man who has once stepped across the threshold of crime, try as he may, cannot hide forever from the world's eye the knowledge of that crime."

"Oh, God! Have mercy upon me!"

The groan came from the man, wrung by mental agony, and seeing his suffering Merle said:

"Mr. Branch, your secret is known to Brandt the Buccaneer and myself only.

"He will soon end his life at the yard-arm, and his pirate crew will quickly follow him.

"I pity you in your misfortunes, and your sins, and, for the sake of your noble wife, and the daughter you so dearly love, as also for the good service you once rendered my slave Mez-rak, I spare you.

"Your wife shall know nothing of the past, and to-day I offer you a position with me as an officer, and I pledge you that in me you shall not want for a friend.

"Now bury the past behind you, and we will do all that we can to find your daughter, and wrest her from the power of this Sea Marauder."

Basil Branch tried to speak, but his emotions overpowered him, and he could only stretch forth his hand and grasp that of Merle in silence.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SEA WOLF REACHES PORT.

I MUST now return to the buccaneer chief, whom Merle Monte surrendered to Captain Mayo Meredith of the Sea Wolf.

When taken on board that vessel and chained to the deck in the guard-room, he certainly could not see the slightest chance of escape from the doom with which he was threatened.

The Sea Wolf at early dawn got under way, and followed by the brig, and next by the cutter, headed out of the inlet.

The two captured vessels had prize crews on board, and, the Sea Wolf setting the example, all spread their sails to make all of the six-knot breeze that was blowing.

Had the wind been heavier the majestic cruiser might have held the lead, but, as it was the brig worked ahead, which showed that Brandt, the Buccaneer, had decided upon a good vessel when he selected the Montezuma for his new craft over which to flaunt the pirate flag.

The little cutter, too, forged to the front, and held her own with the brig, and Captain Meredith and his officers greatly enjoyed the sea race, which showed the respective merits of the three vessels.

At last the Delta was reached, and the two leaders shortened sail to allow the cruiser to lead up the river.

The wind being fair, the three held on up the mighty Mississippi, and when at last their anchors were dropped in the murky waters, and it became known that the Sea Wolf had returned with two pirate vessels as prizes, and that one was the craft of Brandt, the Buccaneer, who was himself in irons on the cruiser, the city went almost wild with joy.

But Captain Meredith was no man to wear honors not justly his own, and he soon made known that the Sea Wolf was not the capturer of the two pirate vessels, only their guard, and that they had been taken in battle by the mysterious Gold Ship, and surrendered to him, and this report he sent on to his Government, at the same time giving an account of Merle Monte's career, since his escape from death at the yard-arm, and making known other facts to prove that the affair for which he had been branded as a mutineer, and tried

and condemned as such, was the working of rival officers.

As soon as he could, Captain Meredith arranged for the trial of Brandt, the Buccaneer, and his pirate crews, and all knew how it must end.

Little Belt, the poor wronged woman, who could have slain Brandt many times, yet spared him, that she might one day be instrumental in bringing him to the gallows, and thirsting to see him thus die, had kept watch upon the chief all the way to the city.

Captain Meredith had told her that he could thoroughly trust his men; but she had shaken her head doubtingly, and begged to be allowed to also keep an eye upon him, if it was not against the discipline of the ship.

"Do so, if you wish, Little Belt; but I remember once you freed this very man, after he reached Washington, where he was to be executed, so perhaps I ought to keep a watch upon you," said Captain Meredith, with a smile.

"No, for now I am content to see him die, as it is with my aid he will be brought to the yard-arm.

"Then, I had no hand in his capture, and had he been executed without, I would have been cheated out of the joy of revenge.

"No, no, Captain Meredith, I have lived but to see him end his days thus, and when all is over I will be content, and my wrecked life will be avenged," she answered, with deep earnestness.

Not wishing to subject herself to the gaze of those about her, and to save the captain of the Sea Wolf from questions he cared not to answer regarding her, Little Belt went ashore and took up her quarters as soon as the cruiser arrived in port.

But ere Little Belt left the Sea Wolf, she sought out each one of the men selected as the guard of the buccaneer chief, and gave them a generous sum of gold, with a promise to quadruple it if the pirate did not escape.

The men gladly pledged themselves that the pirate would never get away from them, and then Little Belt went ashore with a far lighter heart, for at last the end she had longed for was near at hand, and the revenge she had devoted her life to would be consummated.

CHAPTER XV.

THE TEMPTATION.

At last the day for trial came near, and Brandt the Buccaneer felt that the sands of his life were rapidly ebbing away.

He however kept up a bold front before his guards, and though often lost in deep reverie, no trace of what his thoughts were was to be read in his stern face.

Now and then he jested with the guard constantly kept on duty over him, then he would smoke a cigar with apparently the greatest relish, ate his meals with real enjoyment, and when he laid down to sleep, all ironed as he was, seemed to have no fitful dreams and fearful nightmares.

All of his acts and sayings were reported about the ship, and he came to be looked upon as a wonderful and most fearless man.

Each day, since the anchor was let fall in port, Little Belt had visited the ship, and, with a permit from Captain Meredith, had gone to have a look at the prisoner.

"You seem to revel in gazing at me in my chains?" said Brandt to her one morning, the day prior to that set for his trial.

"I do," was the calm reply.

"You hope to see me condemned to die?" he said with a sneer.

"I shall have that pleasure, for your condemnation is a foregone conclusion."

"Then why try me?"

"It is a mere form."

"About how long will my trial last?"

"One day will end it with the evidence against you."

"So soon?"

"Ah! you would like it to drag out for days?"

"Oh no, I care not, for I do not shrink from death," he said with an air of indifference, while the guard put in with:

"I do say that of him, he is the gamest one I ever saw to face death, excepting one other."

"Who was that, my man?" asked Brandt.

"The midshipman who was once on board this very craft, and the idol of the men, and whom Government sentenced wrongfully to die, if I do say it as shouldn't, he a seaman on board a Government vessel."

"You refer to Merle Monte?" said Brandt.

"Yes, sir."

"You are right, he is certainly the most fearless being I ever had to deal with, and his slave is equally so, I must admit."

"He had no cause to fear death, as you have, Brandt, the Buccaneer, with all your red crimes to weigh you down to perdition," almost viciously, said Little Belt! The buccaneer chief paused for an instant, but then laughed lightly, and said:

"Well, Belle, all I ask of you is to come and see me take my last spring, and fetch up at the end of a rope."

"I will do so, and shall be happy in the thought that I was in part instrumental in bringing you to such a death of ignominy."

"Well, I shall be content to see you there, so now leave me."

"For the present, I will: but Brandt Brentford, the pirate, beware of to-morrow, and then of what shall follow it."

She spoke in a deep, thrilling voice, and wheeling suddenly, walked away.

"The little one seems not to love you, cap'n," said the guard.

"No, she hates me."

"She?"

"So I said."

"Is he a she?"

"It is a woman."

"The one who just left here?"

"Yes."

"A woman?"

"Yes."

"My gracious goodness! do you mean it?"

"I do."

"I declare! then I am upset."

"Did you not know it?"

"Never had a suspicion."

"Well, she does disguise herself well, I'll admit!"

"She does for a fact, sir."

"But I did think she was awful handsome and trim-figured for a man, yet I hadn't an idee she was a woman."

"Does no one else on the ship suspect her?"

"None, less 'tis the cap'n, sir."

"I think he knows her as she is, for she got permission from him to come on in the ship and see me hanged."

"I'll declare to gracious, I am all at sea."

"You see, sir, we looked upon him, or rather her, as a mysterious youngster, and couldn't make out her colors: but we didn't suspect her of belonging in petticoats, and kinder thought he was, or she was, you see I do mistake her yet, a young fellow that had been a prisoner on the pirate vessels."

"Yet there was that about her that kept any of us from asking her about herself."

"Well, she is a woman, and one I deemed long ago dead, and wish to Heaven she had been, for she has dogged me as untiringly as a bloodhound, and has been with me in half a dozen disguises, working to get me to the gallows, when I never suspected her."

"Now she has succeeded, and soon I must die."

"Well, you are cool about it, cap'n."

"No need to be otherwise."

"You don't seem to care whether you live or die."

"Oh, yes, I wish to live, and I would give much to do so."

"But there is no hope for you now, cap'n, for they'll find you guilty and sentence you to the yard-arm all in one breath, so you had better make your peace with your Maker."

The chief smiled, and said quietly:

"My man, I never give up the ship until she sinks with colors flying, and if I can escape trial and sentence to-morrow I will do it."

"But you cannot."

"I am not so sure of that, my man, for gold will do wonders."

"You can't buy off those that will try you, if you had all of your pirate earnings on board here with you."

"I do not expect to buy them off; but now for instance, if I should say to you, my man, that I could make you rich to aid my escape, what would you answer?"

"I would say, sir, that it would be a sad temptation to any poor sailor, and I would hate to have you offer it to me, and I am glad, for my honor's sake, that they took your gold from you when they brought you on board," said the man frankly.

Brandt the Buccaneer smiled lightly, and said in a low tone:

"My man, the gold they took from me did not ruin me financially, for I assure you that I have now with me a fortune worthy of a prince."

"Gems are of small size, even the most valuable, and one can hold vast wealth in his mouth even while he was being searched."

"For instance, see this diamond, and tell me what it is worth?" and Brandt handed to the guard a gem of great beauty and value.

"Lordy! it looks beautiful, and I never saw one so large before; but I don't know any more about diamonds than the chaplain does about navigating the ship," and the man eyed the diamond with unfeigned delight, as it rested in the hollow of his hand, sparkling like a tiny star.

CHAPTER XVI.

PRECIOUS STONES.

"WHEN you go off watch at eight bells, my man, could you get leave to go ashore?" asked Brandt the Buccaneer, in his low, and most insinuating tones.

"Yes, cap'n."

"Would you like to take a walk up into the city then?"

"I wouldn't mind."

"Will you do me a favor then?"

"If it isn't ag'in' orders."

"Oh no, there are no orders against what I would ask you to do."

"Well, sir, I'll do it."

"You mustn't let any one know about it."

"Not if you wish me not to, cap'n."

"Well, my man, just take that stone you have in your hand up to Griswold & Company, jewelers, and ask them to give you its exact value."

"You want to leave it to somebody in your will, sir, and would like to know just how much its value is?"

"I would like to know its value, my man, and also the value of this stone."

"Good gracious, it's red as a drop of blood," said the guard, taking the second stone handed to him by the pirate chief.

"Yes, it is a ruby."

"It's mighty pretty."

"Yes, and is of nearly equal value with the diamond."

"Indeed, sir?"

"Well, you will ask the value of it, too?"

"Yes, sir, if you wish me to."

"I do."

"And you are not afraid to trust me with them?"

"No, my man, for you are honest."

"Thank you, sir."

"And also see how Griswold & Company value this gem also," and a third stone was dropped into the hand of the guard.

He seemed dumb with amazement and delight, and cried:

"It's as green as grass."

"Yes, it is an emerald, and may be of like value with the ruby and diamond."

"What do you say they are worth, sir?"

"Well, my estimate, from what I know of precious stones, is that the diamond will bring

you nearly ten thousand dollars in gold, the ruby perhaps a few hundred less, and the emerald something over seven thousand; but Griswold & Company will soon give you the value of them in round figures."

"Yes, sir, and arrest me for stealing them, or being a pirate, who cut somebody's throat for them!" bluntly said the man.

"Ah! I never thought of that; for they might do so."

"Yes, it won't do for a poor sailor like me to go to fooling round with such gems as they be about me."

"True, so do not go to them, but to a Jew, Isaac Jacobs, who lives upon *Rue Royale*."

"He will give you their value, if you offer to pay him for the valuation, and I know he will make the three worth more than twenty-five thousand dollars."

"That's a big fortune, sir, for a man to have."

"See here, my man."

"Here are three more precious stones of equal size and value, a ruby, an emerald, and a diamond, and when you find out the value of those you have, come back to the ship decided in your mind that when you go on duty to-night you will get all six of them for your own."

"How can I, sir?" asked the guard, in a hoarse whisper, and he turned deadly pale.

"Why, in the simplest way in the world."

"How is that, sir?"

"Just let me drop out of that port-hole."

"But you are heavily ironed, sir."

"You can get keys and files ashore to free me of them."

"Oh, sir, this is terrible!"

"It will be more terrible for me to die, my man."

"But, sir—"

"Now don't say any more, but when you go ashore, go to Jacobs's, and ask the value of those gems."

"When he tells you, then purchase what you need to set me free of my irons, and then you get these other three stones, and will be worth a fortune."

"But, cap'n, what good will it do me, when they will hang me up with the rope they had for you?"

"Don't be a fool, my man, for I would not leave you here to suffer, but take you with me."

"You mean for me to desert, sir?"

"Of course."

"What would the officers and my shipmates say?"

"Are you married?"

"No, sir."

"Are you alone in the world?"

"Yes, sir, excepting a girl I intend to make my wife."

"Where is she?"

"In Maine, sir."

"When did you ship?"

"Two years ago, sir."

"Where?"

"Here in Orleans."

"How did you come here?"

"In a packet from Kennebec to York, sir, before the mast, and then in a schooner from York here."

"Did you ship under your own name?"

"Not adzactly, sir, for the boys call me Jack, though I hail to the name of John, and the ship's roll has me down as Jack Johnson, when my real handle is *John Johnstone*."

"Then the former name will be put abroad as the deserter, and you can return with your fortune and marry the girl of your love."

"Come, don't be a fool, but think of what you can do with your money and how happy you can be."

"The precious stones tempt me, sir."

"They would tempt any one, even if he was rich."

"But I may be caught, and—"

"I will take you with me to a place of safety, and you can remain there for months, until the affair is forgotten."

"Come, I'll give you a line to a friend of mine, and he will be on the river below here with a carriage."

"The night is close, this port can be left open, and we can lower ourselves into the river with ropes and then swim shoreward, and go at once to a place of safety."

"What say you, my man?"

"The precious stones tempt me, sir, and I'll do it if Jacobs says they are worth the money you tell me."

"Then go and see."

"Now be on your guard, for it is nearly eight bells," and even as the buccaneer chief spoke the ship's bell struck the hour, and another guard took the place of the one who had been dazzled by the display of gems, and the prisoner saw in the face of the man who then came on duty that, did he offer him a hundred gems, he could never bribe him to forget his honor and his duty, for he was of different material wholly.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE JEW AND THE SAILOR.

It was with a beating heart that John Johnstone asked leave to go ashore, and he felt guilty when it was granted.

With the diamond, ruby and emerald clutched tightly in his hand he sauntered up town, and first sought the elegant establishment of Griswold and Company, to gaze in the window at the gems there displayed.

"They are elegant, but mine beats 'em," he muttered, and then he wended his way down the *Rue Royale* to the shop of the Jew.

The three gilt balls hanging over the door told the story of Isaac Jacobs's business, and within it looked dingy enough.

But the sailor had made up his mind to act, and in he went.

A young Jew greeted him with a sly look, to take his measure, and then asked:

"Vell, sailor mansh, vat ish you vant?"

"I don't want you, youngster, but somebody old enough to attend to business."

"Oh, I ish old enough to attend to all 'e piziness you ish got mit us," was the precocious response, with an emphasis upon the you, which sounded as though the young Israelite had a contempt for the sailor.

"Well, I want to do business with a man, and if you keep the shop I'm off to trade elsewhere."

"Hold on, mine friendt, and I vill call my papa."

"Well, call your pawpaw, and call him quick, for I am in a hurry."

The youngster was cunning enough to see that he had a customer before him, and he at once pulled a rope, which caused a bell to jingle harshly in another part of the house.

In answer to this summons a Jew appeared, who, at a glance, the sailor saw was the business man of the establishment.

He was a shrewd-looking man, with a long beard, and a thorough type of the Israelite.

"Is this Mr. Jacobs?" asked the sailor.

"Dot ish my name," was the calm reply.

"Mr. Isaac Jacobs?" asked the cautious seaman.

"Yesh, mine fri'nt."

"Well, send that boy off, for I have got some important business with you."

The Jew spoke to the youth in Hebrew, and that individual at once decamped, but with an angry look at the seaman.

"Vell, my fri'nt vat can I do for you?"

"Tell me the value of this diamond."

"Aha! it ish quite nice."

"Does you vants to sell him?"

"I want to know what it is worth."

"Ah!" and the cautious Jew looked the stone over thoroughly, and then said:

"I give you six thousand tollars for him."

"No you won't, for it is worth nine," answered Jack Johnstone, who had had sufficient dealing with Jews to know that they never offer near the full value for an article.

"Vell, it ish a nice stone, and I make it seven t'ousant for him."

"Say eight."

"Well, I makes him eight, just to please you, my fr'ent, though I don't make a cent on him, if I has to sell him."

"No, I guess not."

"Well, tell me what this is worth?" and the ruby was handed over.

"Aha! dat ish a pretty one, too."

"What will you giye for it?"

"I will give you four t'ousant dollars," said the Jew, fearing he had hit too low before.

"Make it just eight."

"Aha! vell, it is more prettier than I first see him."

"I makes it eight."

"And this one?"

The emerald was then handed over.

"Aha! dat ish a very pretty stone, too."

"You is have fine taste, my fri'nt," said the delighted Jew, holding his head down to prevent his eyes from betraying his joy at expecting to make a rich bargain.

"Well, what is it worth to you?"

"Vell, ash I ish to pay t'e otters, my fr'ent, I make it four t'ousant."

"Call it six."

"Vell, mine fr'ent, I take it at six t'ousant."

"No, you won't, for I want more."

"Worth more, mine fr'ent?"

"Yes; the three are worth twenty-eight or twenty-nine thousand dollars, and you know it."

"Dat ish a pig sum o' monish."

"I know it, and they are fine gems, and you know it."

"Vere did you git 'em, mine fri'nt?"

"That is none o' your business, Jew; but they cost me enough to make me get their value out of them instead of you, and I want just twenty-five thousand dollars for the three, in good crisp notes."

"I make him twenty-four."

"Not a dollar less."

"Twenty-four t'ousant five hundret."

"Not a dollar less, Jew."

"Vell, mine fr'ent, I takes 'em at dot price, but I makes me very little on 'em."

"You know better, for you can get several hundred on each before night."

"Now out with the money, and I want good crisp bank notes, do you hear?"

The Jew knew he had made a good bargain, and he hastily opened his safe and counted out the money, at the same time doing a stroke of business by selling the sailor a belt to carry his riches in for a dozen times its real value, and chuckling over it in high glee to himself.

Thus armed with his belt of money, the sailor wended his way to a hardware shop, and having an idea of the kind of keys to fit the chains that held the pirate, he purchased a number of those he thought most likely to suit, and then several good files.

Back then to the Sea Wolf he took his way, stopping en route to deliver the note to the man to whom Brandt the Buccaneer had written to meet him on the river bank with a carriage.

Going on board the vessel he felt guilty, and shunned his shipmates, while he lived in dread suspense until the time for him to go on watch.

At last eight o'clock rolled around and he took his post at the door of the guard-room, nervous and trembling, though, when he glanced at the pirate chief he saw that he was perfectly cool, and smoking a cigar after his supper with an air of utter unconcern as to what would be his fate.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE REWARD.

The first hour of his watch, dragged its weary length along so slowly to Jack Johnstone, that he seemed to live a lifetime in waiting for it to pass by.

At last nine o'clock came and the crew went to their hammocks.

Then ten came, and all was silent on board the ship, and no sound was heard save the rumble of the wheels over the stone streets.

Still Brandt the Buccaneer had spoken no word to the man, upon whom his life depended.

But, as the ship's bell struck "four bells," the pirate chief said quietly:

"Well, my man, time flies."

The seaman made no reply, but quietly handed to him the package that held the keys.

His hand trembled as he did so, and the perfectly cool pirate said sternly:

"Keep cool, my man."

Then Brandt the Buccaneer took key after key and fitted them in the key-holes to see if they would unlock his chains.

It seemed that none would, at first; but a second trial succeeded in opening the padlock that held the chains about his ankles.

Next the handcuffs yielded to a key that fitted, and Brandt the Buccaneer was free of his chains.

The port had been half raised, at his request, by the former guard, and Brandt held forth his hand and said, with the utmost calmness:

"The rope."

From where it was coiled about his waist, Jack Johnstone took it, and passing it through one of the iron rings that held the chains, he had freed himself from, Brandt the Buccaneer said:

"Now I will go, and you follow."

Noiselessly he lowered himself out of the port into the muddy waters of the river, and clinging to the side of the vessel, waited the coming of his guard.

As he thus waited, he could hear the low voice of the officer of the deck humming a love song, as he paced to and fro not twenty feet from him, and the snoring of some robust seaman forward.

At last the deserting sailor appeared in the port, and lowered himself down nearly to the water, when his nerveless hands failed him, and he fell into the stream with a splash.

Instantly he was seized in a vise-like grip, and dragged beneath the waters.

The splash was heard by the officer of the deck, who walked quickly to the side and looked over.

But all was dark and still, and he muttered: "It was some large catfish doubtless, springing up to see the lights of the city."

Then he resumed his walk and his song, and an instant after Brandt the Buccaneer and the frightened seaman arose for air.

"Fool! you nearly lost all."

"Be calm, and swim low in the water, and without noise!" hissed the buccaneer, and the two went down with the stream, until the Sea Wolf grew dim in the distance.

Then the two turned shoreward, and at last reached the bank, where a vehicle was visible, evidently waiting for some one, and a man paced near.

"Giro!"

The chief spoke the name in a low tone.

"Senor," was the prompt response, "I am here."

"The Virgin be praised!" said the man, as the chief and the seaman staggered from the river.

"Spring upon your box now, and drive with all speed to your den."

"Yes, senor," and the two fugitives having entered the vehicle, the man whom Brandt had called by the name of Giro sprung upon his box, and whipped his horse away at a rapid pace.

After a ride of ten minutes, the vehicle drew up before a low, dingy-looking house, and Giro threw open the door.

"There are cloaks in there for you to throw around you, senors," he said.

"I have mine, but my friend will not need his," was the reply.

"It is better, senor, as you will have to pass through the *cafe*, and some may remark your wet clothing."

"I will use mine, Giro, but the one who accompanied me will not need his, for he is dead."

"Dead, senor?" gasped Giro.

"Yes; I put my knife into his heart, for it was the best thing I could do, Giro, and I am

too poor a man now to throw away twenty-five thousand dollars.

"Drive back to the river, Giro, and throw the body in, and then come up to my room."

"All right, senor; you have your old quarters, and I will be there as soon as I have gotten rid of your friend and put my horse up," and the vehicle rolled away, while Brandt, the Buccaneer, entered the door of the house, and found himself in a dimly lighted *cafe*, where were half a dozen men smoking and drinking.

Drawing his cloak around him, he passed on through to an opposite door, and ascending a pair of stairs turned into a pleasant chamber at the top.

"Well, I am free once more and back in my old quarters."

"Ha! ha! ha! I begin to believe the hemp is not grown yet to make a rope to hang me," and closing the door he bolted it, and threw himself down in an easy-chair to think over his escape, and with no compunction for the man he had slain, and whose reward for serving him had been death at the hands of the one he had so well served.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE TWO CAPTAINS.

THE man Giro was not gone more than an hour, and his first remark, upon entering the room, where Brandt, the Buccaneer sat, was:

"Well, senor, the news is abroad."

"Of my escape?" coolly asked the chief.

"Yes, senor."

"Doubtless, for at eight bells, when the other guard went on watch, my escape was discovered."

"The city guard has been alarmed and are patrolling the streets, and men from the vessels have been landed and sent out."

The buccaneer laughed at this, and returned to his repast of cold fowl and wine, which he had ordered, after changing his wet clothes for a suit Giro had thoughtfully laid out for him.

"Take a glass of wine, Giro, for you have been out in the night air," said Brandt, and when his host had drank to his success the chief continued:

"Now, Giro, what am I to do?"

"How, senor?"

"I am ashore."

"True."

"Stranded high and dry."

"Well, senor, that has happened to you before?"

"But I have no vessel."

"I know that, senor."

"Nor crew."

"Both can be procured, soon."

"Not easily this time, for even row-boats on the river will be watched now."

"Yes, and the city will be searched most thoroughly, senor."

"I do not doubt that; but then no one would suspect good, Christian Giro, of harboring a pirate."

"No, senor, I stand well with the community, and am thought to be poor," mildly said the man.

"When the truth is, you are a salesman of pirate goods and are worth a fortune."

"Yes, senor, thanks to you."

"Then, if you thank me, Giro, aid me."

"How, senor?"

"I must go at once to sea."

"At once?"

"Yes, for I dare not delay."

"Have you thought of any plan?"

"None, Giro."

"How do you wish to go?"

"Any way in which I can, for once at sea, I can soon find a way to tread a deck as master."

"Your brig might—"

"No, it would be impossible to cut it out now, after my escape."

"The cutter of Captain Eduardo?"

"That could not be done with any more success than the brig."

"There is no vessel in port that would suit you, senor, other than the cruiser."

"The Sea Wolf?"

"Yea, senor."

"She is too large for a pirate, and besides, I could not attempt to take her with a raw crew, for I know Meredith would let every man on his deck die before he would give up."

"Then, senor, how would you like to play second fiddle?"

"I do not understand you."

"I have as my guest at present a gentleman for whom I am shipping a crew."

"For what purpose?"

"Piracy."

"Where?"

"In the Gulf!"

"If he is a new hand he'll be hanged within the month, for piracy has but a short race to run now, Giro."

"Yea, senor, the good old days are going fast, before the march of civilization; but this person is not a new hand."

"Ah!"

"No, he has fought many a battle for plunder, and commands a good craft."

"Then what is he shipping a crew for?"

"He wishes to enlarge his crew, and I am getting the men, but have failed to find him a second luff he needs."

"Second luff?"

"Yea, senor, for he has a well trusted first lieutenant in command of his vessel, while he is here in the city."

"I see; then I would have to be third in rank?"

"Yea, senor; but you know I merely suggest this as a chance for escape and promotion."

"Ah yes, I can soon promote myself, you think."

"From what I know of you, senor, I think you can."

"Well, I think favorably of your plan, so who is this pirate?"

"Captain Pierre."

"Ha! The commander of the Sea Marauder, and who is himself also called by that name?"

"I have heard of him often, but never met him."

"He is a good commander and has a fleet and stanch craft."

"He is a good man, captain, and his vessel is a good one."

"Where is he now?"

"In his room."

"When does he sail?"

"To-morrow night."

"In what?"

"A lugger he has loaded with heavy guns, and with a crew that go blacked up as plantation negroes."

"A good scheme; but is not his craft armed?"

"Not with as heavy guns as those he carries to her now, and he is preparing for a particular cruise."

"After what?"

"The Gold Ship."

"Ha! Giro, just seek Captain Pierre, and ask him to my room to have a glass of wine with me, and bring us up a few bottles of your best," was the prompt order of Brandt, when he learned that the Sea Marauder was to cruise after the Gold Ship.

Giro was absent from the room but a few minutes, when he returned accompanied by none other than Captain Pierre, whom the reader is already acquainted with as Pierre Dupont, and whose real name was Dupont Plerson.

"Captain Pierre, permit me to introduce to you Senor Brentano, whom I have engaged to serve as your second luff," said Giro, who deemed it best not to let Brandt be known just then in his true character.

Captain Pierre was pleased with the appearance of his new officer, and at once accepted his invitation to drink a bottle of wine with him, and over it, the two captains seemed to become most friendly.

"When do you sail, captain?" asked Brandt.

"Giro promises me I can get off to-morrow night, Lieutenant Brentano, and I hope that is not too soon for you."

"Oh no, I am ready to-night for that matter," was the indifferent reply, and Giro said:

"It will be impossible to get all the men before to-morrow night, as, in these days of suspicion and treachery, senors, I engage them at the last moment."

"Your guns are on board, captain, and I have but half a dozen more good fellows to get for you to-morrow, and then you can sail," and with this the two pirates seemed content.

CHAPTER XX.

PEARL, THE PIRATE'S PRIDE.

WHEN Pearl swooned away, at the sad tidings brought her by the young pirate lieutenant, it was a long, long time before he could restore her to consciousness again.

When at last she opened her beautiful eyes and gazed into his anxious face, her first question was for her father.

Again he told her the sad story of the attack and the defeat, and of her father's having been left behind, while he held forth the hope that he might be alive, and a prisoner.

"No, that would be even worse, for he would be taken while fighting with pirates," she murmured, and, seeing the pained look that flashed over the face of the young officer at her words, she said quickly:

"Forgive me, if I wounded you; but I do not look upon you as a pirate at heart."

"Thank you for those words, sweet Pearl, and I frankly tell you I am not."

"To confess to you, I will tell you that I am a native of Carolina, and was brought up in the navy."

"My father was a planter, and he died leaving my mother, myself and my sister well off."

"I entered the navy, and, after a cruise of five years returned to find that my mother had married a man whom all knew to be an adventurer and gambler, and that he had forced my sister into a marriage with one of his friends, a man as bad as himself."

"Between them they had squandered our wealth, and well-nigh broken my mother's and my sister's hearts."

"Instantly I determined upon revenge, and I called them out."

"They refused to meet me in a duel, they said on account of the relationship they bore to me."

"But I was rendered desperate by their behavior toward those I loved, and I would not hear to a refusal, and forced them to fight me, and both fell."

"One was instantly killed, my step-father, and the other mortally wounded, but before he died he said that they were unarmed, and that I had murdered them."

"Some friend of his carried off the pistols they had, and, as I had no witnesses I was proclaimed a murderer and forced to fly for my life."

"I had little money, and I shipped before the mast in a small vessel which was wrecked, and I alone was saved of the crew by clinging to a boat."

"I drifted about for several days, and nearer dead than alive was picked up by this schooner, and Captain Pierre nursed me most faithfully, and upon my recovery offered me the place of first lieutenant, telling me his vessel was a Mexican cruiser."

"I gladly accepted the offer, joined him in a fight with a vessel, and then saw that he was a pirate."

"But the step was taken, and in sheer despair I remained with him."

"This was nearly a year ago, and yet I linger upon a pirate vessel when my manhood and my honor tell me I should give up the life I lead."

"And why will you not?" asked Pearl, who had listened to his story with such deep interest she had almost forgotten her own sorrows.

"I cannot betray the man who has served me well; but I will soon leave this hated ves-

sel, and I pledge you my honor, Pearl, that for your sweet sake I will give up this fearful life at the very earliest moment that I can."

"And more, I promise that no harm shall befall you from Captain Pierre, if I have to take his life to prevent it, for since I have known you I have loved you, and girl though you may be, you have wrapped about me the tendrils of your heart, until you have become to me my life, my love, my pride."

He spoke with deep earnestness, dropping upon one knee before her.

It was the first confession of love she had ever heard, and it frightened her, and with pale face and startled eyes she sprung away from him, crying:

"Oh, do not talk thus to me, for I am a mere child."

"I pity you—yes, respect you—but know nothing of what love is."

At once he arose to his feet and said softly:

"I was wrong, Pearl, to alarm you."

"Do not fear me, for I will be as a brother to you."

"Thank you; now I will trust you," she said, offering her hand, which he grasped warmly and then went on deck.

From his peon seaman he heard that the Gold Ship was standing off and on along the coast, and he knew well that his vessel must keep close in her retreat.

And there she remained, until finding that the Gold Ship did not depart, and fearing a more thorough search would be made, he watched his chance one dark night, and, with his boats and under bare poles, towed out to sea and sailed away, leaving a word to Captain Pierre, should he return during his absence, as to the cause of his departure.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE SCRAP OF PAPER.

WHEN the Gold Ship arrived off the coast, where it was hoped that the Sea Marauder would be found, a boat was lowered, and into it Basil Branch was placed in as comfortable a position as was possible.

Then, as soon as he got his bearings, he piloted the boat, in which were Merle Monte and half a dozen oarsmen, to the inlet into which flowed a lagoon.

Once on the right track, it did not take him long to find the narrow canal-way, which led into the Lost Pond.

As soon as the locality was placed, as they dared not venture by day, the boat returned to the schooner, as though it had made no discovery, should the Sea Marauder be in the Lost Pond, and prying eyes he watching.

But at nightfall Merle and Mezrak started together in the gig, and rowed with muffled oars to the canal.

Then Mezrak landed and made his way along the low shores, to return to the boat after half an hour and report to his master that no vessel was visible in the Lost Pond.

Then the black rowed the boat into the canal that Merle might see, and returning to the schooner, the men were called up, and the vessel was turned storeward.

Without accident or trouble the schooner got into the Lost Pond, and was safely moored there.

With the first break of day Merle was up to view his surroundings, and Mezrak, who had not retired at all, handed him a scrap of paper, which he had found pinned to a tree, on shore.

"Well, Mezrak, as usual you have made some important discovery," said Merle, as he glanced over the paper, and then read aloud:

"Attacked the Gold Ship, which lay in lagoon near here, with my boats and was beaten off."

"Your male prisoner aided me, by acting as officer, and was killed."

"Gold Ship searching the coast so thoroughly I towed out to-night, and will return about the fifteenth of the month."

"Lady prisoner well, but grieved most deeply at loss of her father."

"The Sea Marauder will be back about the fifteenth, he says here, so we will wait right

in this Lost Pond, Mezrak, to give him a welcome.

"Poor girl, she grieves deeply for her father, he writes, believing him dead, and I feel for her in her great woe.

"But I have hopes that all will come well, for Captain Pierre has not returned to his vessel, that is certain, and this pirate lieutenant seems to be a good fellow.

"Mezrak!"

"Yes, master."

"You must keep a bright watch for the coming of Captain Pierre, for this is the rendezvous where he was to meet his vessel, and, as I have time before the fifteenth, to go up to the city, I will row up the bayous to some of the Indian camps which are there, and get them to take me to New Orleans."

"You will master return?"

"As soon as I can see Little Belt, who I hope will be willing to return with me, as, by this time doubtless, Brandt the Buccaneer has been hanged.

"Now to tell Mr. Branch and his wife what this scrap of paper makes known, and give them what hope I can," and Merle entered the cabin.

But, half an hour after he was on his way up the lagoon in an open boat, which was to leave him at the camp of some Indians, known to live inland a few leagues, and from thence he could readily make his way to New Orleans with a good guide, by way of the network of bayous.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE LUGGER.

WHEN the morning dawned upon New Orleans, after the escape of Brandt the Buccaneer, it found the citizens in a state of great excitement.

The news of the daring escape of the pirate chief had become known, and while patrols marched the streets and made search of every suspicious locality, guard boats rowed about the river, and every vessel, from a fishing smack to a clipper packet ship, was most thoroughly overhauled, and their crews looked squarely in the face.

To add to the excitement the body of the dead seaman had been found, with a knife thrust in his heart, and from censure the feeling turned to pity for him, for few could but believe that the bold outlaw had killed him at his post.

One of the first orders of Captain Meredith was to hang the most guilty of the pirates, while the others were sent ashore to the city prison for safe keeping until their fate was decided upon.

After this duty was attended to Captain Meredith sought the quarters where he knew Little Belt had located herself in the town.

To his surprise Little Belt had not visited the ship upon learning of the escape of Brandt, the Buccaneer, as she must have done, and that fact aroused his suspicions against the woman.

He remembered how she had, when playing cabin-boy, once before set the chief free, when the schooner that had carried the pirate North in irons was lying in the Potomac, and somehow, in spite of her protestations of seeking revenge, and wishing to see the buccaneer hanged, he could not but doubt her, under existing circumstances.

As he had feared, he found that Little Belt was not at her quarters.

The landlord said that he (for he believed the woman to be a youth) had paid his bill at daylight and gone away, leaving no word; but that just as he had left the door he had suddenly met a person whom he seemed delighted to see, and who in return was evidently glad to meet him.

"That was the pirate, and none other, she met.

"The woman is a fraud," growled Captain Meredith, as he went on his way to the headquarters of the city officers, to see if aught had been heard of the buccaneer.

But nowhere did he get any comfort, and he returned on board his vessel, to see that a large crew was put at once on the brig and the cutter, as he well knew the daring of the escaped chief, and did not doubt but that he was concealed somewhere in the city, awaiting an opportunity to seize some vessel, and put to sea in it, and perhaps his own craft.

And at last night settled down upon the town and river, and Mayo Meredith paced his deck in no enviable frame of mind, after the day having passed, and no tidings of the recapture of the bold fugitive been brought to him, as he had hoped would be the case.

Presently he heard the sound of voices in song, and beheld a large lugger coming down the stream under light sail.

He listened, and heard a plantation song, sung in chorus by half a score of voices, and knew it was one of the coast luggers that traded between the city and the estates below, or perhaps a vessel belonging to some wealthy planter.

But he had given orders that no vessel should leave the port that night, and sternly hailed:

"Ho the lugger!"

The singing of the negroes prevented his hail from being heard, and waiting until there was a pause in the song he hailed loudly again:

"Ho the lugger; ahoy!"

"Ay, ay, massa," came back the answer in the dialect of the plantation slave.

"What lugger is that?"

"Massa Vincent's lugger, sah, from de Soldier Rest Plantation, massa," came the reply.

"Do you not know orders have been given that no vessel is to leave port to-night?"

"No, sah, nobody done tole us so," was the innocent reply.

"Well, I tell you so now."

"Lordy, massa cap'n, our massa tan our hide well if we don't git ter plantation fore day, 'cause he sent de lugger after s'plies."

Captain Meredith was in a quandary what to do.

He could easily make the lugger come to anchor; but then the negroes seemed so anxious to go on, and on their vessel there could certainly be no pirate concealed, that he concluded to allow the lugger to continue on its way, but called out:

"Who have you on board?"

"Only us, sah."

"Who are us?"

"Jim, and Dan, and me, and Bob, and Sam, and—"

"For Heaven's sake hold!"

"Have you no passengers on board?"

"Not a one, massa, 'cause our massa don't 'low it."

"And no strangers?"

"Nary one, massa cap'n."

"All right, you can go on your way; but keep quiet while you are passing through the shipping."

"We will, massa, 'tankee sah," and the lugger went on its way.

And Captain Mayo Meredith continued to pace his deck, little dreaming that there was not a negro on the lugger, but only white faces blacked up, and that the one who answered his hail and questions was none other than Brandt, the Buccaneer, himself, while Captain Pierre stood by his side, and two score of men, enlisted for "desperate work on the high seas, and plenty of gold in return," were crouching below the decks, breathlessly awaiting the result of their bold venture.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE SEA MARAUDER'S RETURN.

To keep his appointment with his captain, after a cruise out into the Gulf, Vance Murell put back for the rendezvous at Lost Pond.

Arriving off the coast, he was glad to see that the Gold Ship was nowhere in sight, so stood steadily in.

He was a cautious commander, and hence

preferred night to venture in, and luffed up until dark.

Then he sent Peon ashore to reconnoiter, and see if the captain had returned.

Peon launched his light canoe and paddled swiftly shoreward, entered the inlet, then the lagoon, and ran ashore to have a look into the Lost Pond.

As he stepped from the canoe he found himself in a grasp he could not shake off.

It was a double grasp, for one hand was upon his throat, and then an arm was thrown around him and he could neither cry out or break away.

The Indian was as wiry as a snake, and very powerful; but he had met his master.

Without seeming trouble his captor bore him to a small hut, made of the branches of trees covered with moss.

Within was burning a ghastly fire, yet the moss kept its light hidden from without.

Then there were skulls, bones, and many other things hideous to look at.

But most hideous of all to Peon, was his captor.

He looked part human, part brute, and all devil.

Out of his forehead protruded huge horns, his body was black, and nude to the waist, while his face was blue, with red streaks across it.

He was deformed in body and head, and Peon, with the superstition of his race, was assured that the Devil had him, and he lay on the ground passive, looking up in horror at his captor and making no effort to escape.

His captor gazed down upon him an instant in silence, and then said in sepulchral tones, and in the Spanish tongue.

"You are a Peon Indian of Mexico?"

"Yes, senor," groaned Peon.

"Your name is Itzi?"

"Yes, Senor Diabolo."

"You sail the sea in an armed craft?"

"I do, senor."

"They call you Peon there?"

"They do, senor."

"The vessel is known as the Sea Marauder?"

"It is, Senor Diabolo."

"Her captain is away?"

"Yes, good Diabolo."

"Her lieutenant sent you here to see if there was danger in the Lost Pond to the craft?"

"Yes, beautiful Diabolo."

"I am Satan."

"I know it well, Senor Diabolo."

"You are my slave?"

"I am, senor."

"You will obey me?"

"In all things, senor."

"Then go, I command you, back to your vessel, and tell your lieutenant that the Lost Pond holds no danger for him, or his vessel."

"Yes, senor."

"If you disobey me, your tongue shall wither, and—"

"No, no, good Senor Diabolo; I will obey."

"Begone then, and beware!"

The frightened Indian sprung to his feet and darted away like the wind.

Springing into his canoe, he sent it flying down the lagoon.

"Well, Mezrak, thanks to what Mr. Branch told you, you played your part of Satan well, and frightened that poor Indian half out of his wits," and Lieutenant Trenor entered the moss hut, and almost started at the hideousness of the black's make up, and his fearful surroundings.

"He will be faithful, sir," said Mezrak, calmly.

"I do not doubt it, so now to prepare for the coming of the schooner," and the officer returned on board the schooner, which was moored to the shore, and in a short time had his men arranged on each side of the canal, and securely hidden.

The canal leading into Lost Pond, was, as I have said, little wider than a vessel, and the banks were clad with trees, while the basin was so surrounded with foliage that the Gold

Ship could not be discovered in there even by any one forty paces distant.

A wait of an hour, and then the steady dip of oars was heard, and Mezrak, who had been reconnoitering in the gig, reported the boats towing the schooner in, and that they were already in the lagoon.

With bated breath all waited, and especially the mother and father of Pearl, whom they longed to see, and yet dreaded to hear what might have been the fate of the beautiful girl.

Standing upon the deck of the Gold Ship by the side of her husband, who rested in a chair, for he was not yet recovered from his wound, Mrs. Branch listened to every stroke of the oars that brought her daughter nearer to her, and with an anguish which only a mother's heart can feel.

Nearer and nearer drew the Sea Marauder, the boats headed for the canal, the helm was put down to point into it, and not one on board dreamed of danger.

Then the two boats in advance entered the canal, the next two followed, and then the sharp bows of the beautiful schooner passed into it.

"On board, lads, and remember not a shot is to be fired! Take her with the cutlass!"

The cry of Lieutenant Trenor fell like a thunder-clap from a cloudless sky upon the ears of the Sea Marauder's crew, and in obedience to his command half a hundred men sprung with mighty leaps upon the deck of the schooner, following their leader, and instantly, almost, the vessel was in their possession, while the crew in the boats, unarmed, surprised and caught, cried lustily for quarter. At that instant a bright light illumined the scene, for a blue light had been lit upon the deck of the Gold Ship, and upon the quarter-deck, his hand upon the wheel, plainly revealed, stood Vance Murell, the pirate lieutenant, and by his side Pearl, watching the strange wild scene with terror.

With amazement they had both heard the ringing cry of Merle Monte, and, with two-thirds of his men in the boats ahead, and those on deck at once cut down by the boarders, the young officer knew that resistance was useless.

That pirates were his foes he felt assured, and well knowing in such case what a fate would be Pearl's, he determined to defend her with his life, or even take her life, rather than that she should fall into their power.

Hence he drew a sword in one hand and a pistol in the other, and, as Lieutenant Trenor, who in Merle Monte's absence held command, advanced with several men at his back, he cried:

"Back, or you die!"

"Surrender, sir, I demand you!" ordered Lieutenant Trenor, sternly.

"To whom?"

"To the Gold Ship."

"Never!" was the defiant reply.

"Then your fate be upon your own head. Advance, men, and cut him down, but fire no shot to hurt the maiden."

"Ha! that is your game!" cried the young officer, hearing the words and misunderstanding them; and he turned toward Pearl, at the same time placing his sword's point over her heart.

She never flinched, but stood like a statue, seemingly preferring to die thus than become the prisoner of pirates—which she supposed the attacking party to be.

"God forgive me, but Pearl, my beautiful darling, I will drive my sword through your pure heart before their vile hands shall pollute you with a touch!"

Vance Murell said the words in calm defiance of his foes, and he would have kept his word and then fought until he fell; but suddenly a black form sprung over the stern of the schooner, a very demon it looked in the wild glare, the sword's point was knocked upward, the pistol wrenched from the young officer's hand, and he was at once in the fearful clutch of Mezrak.

"Hold, Mezrak! do not harm him," cried Lieutenant Trenor, springing forward just in time to catch poor Pearl, whom the sight of

the painted and disguised black had caused to faint away.

"Senor, we are no pirates, and mean you no harm."

"Come with me, for I bear this lady to her father and mother who await her on yonder vessel," said Lieutenant Trenor; and in a half-dezayed way Vance Murell, whom he had addressed, and whom Mezrak had released, followed his captor in silence, gazing the while anxiously upon the face of Pearl as she was held unconscious in the strong arms of the officer of the Gold Ship.

Springing ashore, Lieutenant Trenor crossed the narrow strip of land, and thus reached the Gold Ship; and with a glad cry the mother sprung toward her daughter, crying:

"My God! is she dead?"

"No, madam; she has only fainted and will soon recover," assured Lieutenant Trenor, as he placed Pearl in her mother's arms.

And, kind reader, over the scene that followed, when Pearl revived, to find her mother and father not dead, but living, I will draw the veil, for the reunion of those three, so strangely parted, and more strangely met, was too sacred to dwell upon.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE TRAP.

THE night passed away in the Lost Pond, and, reunited once more, the father, mother and daughter were happy, and sat in the cabin until a late hour.

Nor were they selfish in their joy, for they invited Lieutenant Trenor and the pirate lieutenant, Vance Murell, who had proven such a true friend to Pearl, to be with them to talk over the past and plan for the future.

Pearl told her story, and Vance Murell had his to tell, and thus the hours passed, while the crew put the pirate prisoners in irons, and got both vessels ready to greet Captain Pierre, come in what shape he might.

As for Peon, he was kept near Mezrak, whom he now knew was not really Satan himself, and consequently feared him less.

Merle Monte's absence was regretted by all, and the hope that he would return in safety was often expressed.

In the mean time, while all was satisfactory in the Lost Pond, with the exception of the pirate prisoners, a lugger was standing in toward the lagoon which the canal opened into.

Her decks were crowded with men forward, but aft only three were visible, and one of these held the wheel.

A close scrutiny of the craft would show that it was the same lugger which Captain Mayo Meredith had hailed from the deck of the Sea Wolf, on her way down the river, and with the black washed off of their faces, the two men standing near the helmsman were recognizable as Brandt, the Buccaneer, and Captain Pierre, of the Sea Marauder.

Captain Pierre was a man of caution in all things, and therefore, though he believed the Lost Pond to be known to only himself and crew, he yet would not run in without reconnoitering, and when half a league from shore he luffed up, and said:

"I'll take a boat and two men and run in, for I do not care to get into a trap."

"If I signal with my lantern, stand down for me in haste, Mr. Brandt, and keep the lugger off and on under full sail ready to fly, should there be danger."

"Ay, ay, sir; lower away a boat there, and two men get into it," ordered Brandt, in his character of Lieutenant Brentano.

The boat was at once lowered, and two of the crew promptly sprung to the oars, as Captain Pierre came over the side of the lugger.

Away it went, under the strong pull of the oarsmen, and soon disappeared from the view of those on the lugger.

Straight for the inlet it was headed, by Captain Pierre, who had the tiller, and crossing this it moved slowly for the mouth of the lagoon, the oarsmen placing their jackets in the oarlocks to muffle the oars.

"My oar will creak, sir, so please let me have your cloak," said one of the rowers, and the one nearest the stern.

Captain Pierre arose to hand it to him, when suddenly his hand was seized with a grip he could not shake off, a pistol muzzle was thrust into his face, and a stern voice cried:

"Surrender, Captain Pierre Dupont, or you are a dead man."

The pirate saw that he was caught in a trap, and that death was certain if he resisted, and he cried nervously:

"Who are you?"

"I am Merle Monte of the Gold Ship, Captain Pierre of the Sea Marauder," was the startling announcement.

"And you, my man, will you let your captain be seized without resistance?" cried Captain Pierre, as soon as his amazement would allow him to speak.

"Oh, I am Little Belt, the first luff of the Gold Ship," was the careless reply of the supposed seaman, whose disguise, like Merle's, no one could have penetrated.

"Then I surrender," was the cool reply of the man, who had regained his nerve.

"You are wise."

"Hold forth your hands, please," and Merle clasped irons upon the wrists, and then disarmed his prisoner, tied his feet together and gagged him.

"Now, Belt, I will land yonder and go by shore to the schooner and get ready to greet the lugger, which you return to and tell Brandt the Buccaneer to run in," said Merle.

The prisoner made a sign that he wished to speak, and Merle removed the gag, after threatening him with death if he cried out.

"Did you say Brandt the Buccaneer?" he asked.

"I did, and I referred to your lieutenant, Brentano, who is the pirate chief in disguise."

"Great Heaven! can this be true?"

"It certainly is, for he bribed a guard to set him free from the Sea Wolf, and my lieutenant here, Little Belt, tracked the man, saw what his game was, watched his chance, shipped on your lugger, through your agent Giro, and meeting me, I joined him, and here we are."

The man groaned, and the gag was replaced in his mouth, and he was taken from the boat and tied to a tree for safe keeping until Merle could return for him.

Then Little Belt sprung into the boat and started back to tell Brandt that Captain Pierre said to run boldly in, as all was safe, while Merle went along shore toward the Lost Pond.

His sudden appearance upon the deck of the Gold Ship was a startling surprise. But he had no time to explain matters, so gave his orders quickly, got his boats and their crews into them armed with cutlasses only, and with orders not to kill Brandt the Buccaneer.

Lieutenant Trenor took charge of one boat, and Vance Murell volunteered to command another, and, as Merle heard of his conduct toward Pearl, he readily consented.

Then the boats moved out of the canal, and laid in wait under the branches of the trees along the banks.

They had not long to wait, for the lugger came slowly up the lagoon using her sweeps.

When opposite the boats, out they darted; their crews threw themselves upon the deck, and, after a short fight, the craft was captured.

Brandt the Buccaneer had drawn his cutlass the moment the boats appeared; but Little Belt was standing by his side, the chief little dreaming who she was, and instantly striking the blade from his hand, she thrust a pistol to his temple, and cried:

"Brandt the Buccaneer, you are my prisoner at last!"

"God above! you, Belle Denham?" gasped the pirate chief.

"Ay, ay, sir, and Merle Monte too," and Merle sprung to his side and seizing his hands clasped manacles upon his wrists, and thus the lugger was captured in the well-laid trap.

CHAPTER XXV.

MERLE MONTE'S FATE.

There was one drawback to the gallant capture of the lugger, and that was, when Merle Monte sought the place where he had left Captain Pierre bound to a tree, that unworthy wretch was missing.

Search was made for him, but without avail, and Vance Murell reported that Peon had been out in his canoe, and had doubtless set him free and escaped with him, for the Indian was devoted to the pirate captain.

With the dawn the Gold Ship, the Sea Marauder and the lugger got under sail, and headed for New Orleans, and the following day the three vessels glided into port, and startled the good citizens, for, swung up in the rigging was Brandt the Buccaneer, who had at last expiated his crimes at the end of a rope, and Little Belt, had given the order to hang him, for she requested Merle to allow her to do so.

The Gold Ship dropped anchor near the Sea Wolf, and the first one to board the beautiful vessel was Captain Mayo Meredith, and he held in his hands an official document, while he said:

"Merle Monte, the Government has sent you pardon, for your gallant services, and instead of being hanged your fate is to be a lieutenant in the navy, and my word for it, that when this last venture is heard of you will be made a captain."

Merle thanked the captain most heartily, and returned:

"Now that I am restored to honor, and given rank, Captain Meredith, I shall at once resign and settle down to private life, to enjoy my fortune, which has been, so far, such a curse to me."

And in spite of all entreaties Merle kept his word, and his pleasure was in restoring to Basil Branch his former home in all its beauty, and enriching all who had served him faithfully.

The Gold Ship he kept for his private yacht, saying that some day he might need it again.

Taking a fancy to Vance Murell, he made him his lieutenant, and Captain Trenor was given a large vessel in his own right, and was thereby made truly happy.

Rumor had it that Merle Monte loved Pearl Branch; but as Vance Murell also loved her, and the two were friends, both seemed to yield in favor of the other, and neither asked for her hand.

As for Little Belt, she threw off the garb of manhood, resumed her own attire, and, after long urging, became the wife of Captain Mayo Meredith.

And Mezrak the Faithful still remained the devoted slave of his dearly loved master to the end, but he seemed grieved that Merle did not make Pearl the Pirate's Pride his wife.

THE END.

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